

The *Master* of Ragnarok & Blesser of *Einherjar*

BY SEIICHI TAKAYAMA
ILLUSTRATION: YUKISAN

16



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**"Don't jump to
conclusions."**

**"I have no
intention of
abandoning
this fight."**



Utgarda, patriarch of the Silk Clan, was a tyrant. But she wasn't *just* a tyrant. She was an extremely skilled tyrant.





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Characters

Felicia

Yuuto's adjutant, and sworn younger sister. She is an Einherjar with the all-purpose rune Skirnir, the Expressionless Servant.

Sigrún

Yuuto's sworn daughter, a soldier and Einherjar of the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon. She holds the title of Máhagarmr, given only to the Wolf Clan's strongest warrior.

Yuuto Suoh

A young man summoned to the world of Yggdrasil from the modern era. As the sovereign of his newly-created Steel Clan, he now rules over multiple subordinate clans as the reginarch, or "Great Lord."

Linnea

The sovereign of the Horn Clan, and a talented administrator. She is currently Yuuto's sworn daughter, and the second-in-command of the Steel Clan.

Ingrid

Yuuto's sworn daughter, and chief blacksmith of the workshop which produces weapons and other items for the Wolf Clan. She is an Einherjar with the rune Ívaldi, Birther of Blades.



Mitsuki Shimoya

Yuuto's childhood friend and beloved. She made up her mind that she would live together with Yuuto, and thanks to Felicia's summoning ritual, she is now a resident of Yggdrasil.



Albertina and Kristina

Twin daughters of the Claw Clan patriarch, Kris and Al for short. Teasing her flighty sister Albertina is what Kristina lives for.



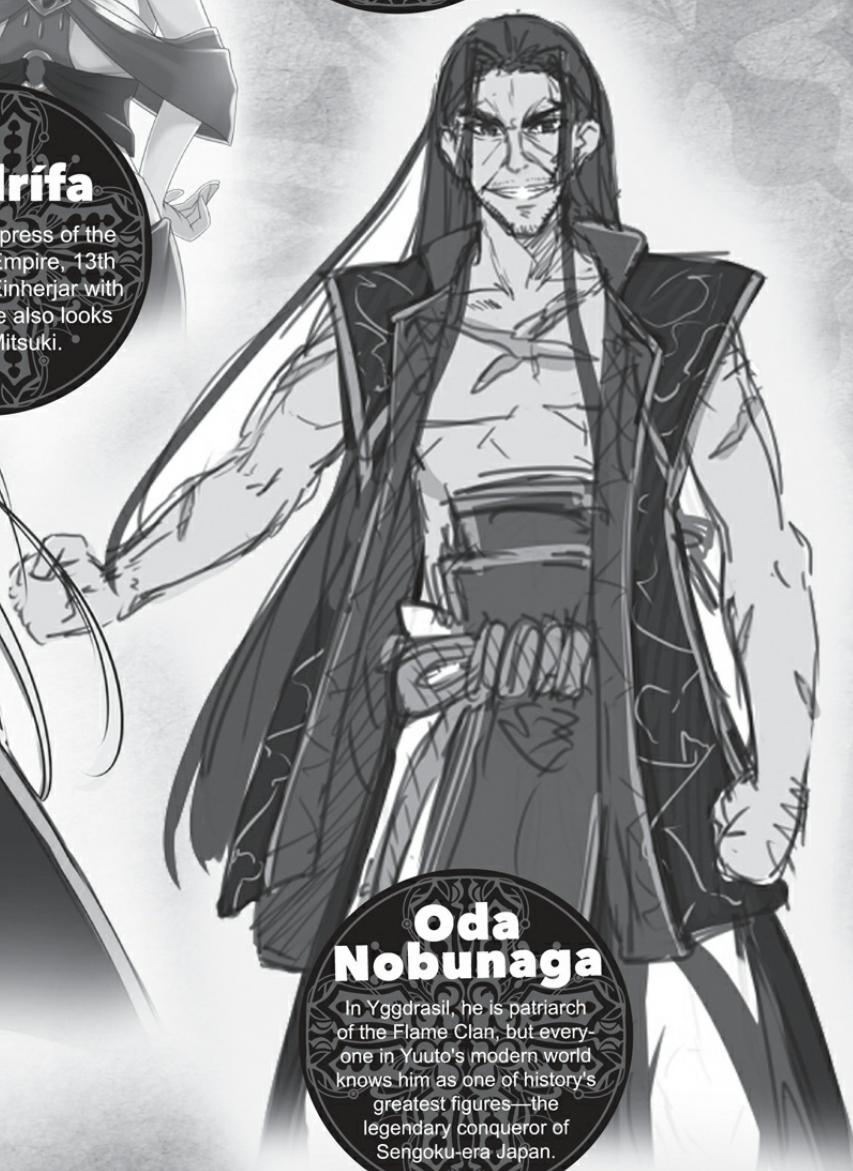
Sigdrífa

The Divine Empress of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, 13th of her line. An Einherjar with twin runes, she also looks just like Mitsuki.



Hveðrungr

A masked Einherjar with the rune Alþjófr, Jester of a Thousand Illusions. His true identity is Loptr, Felicia's brother by birth.

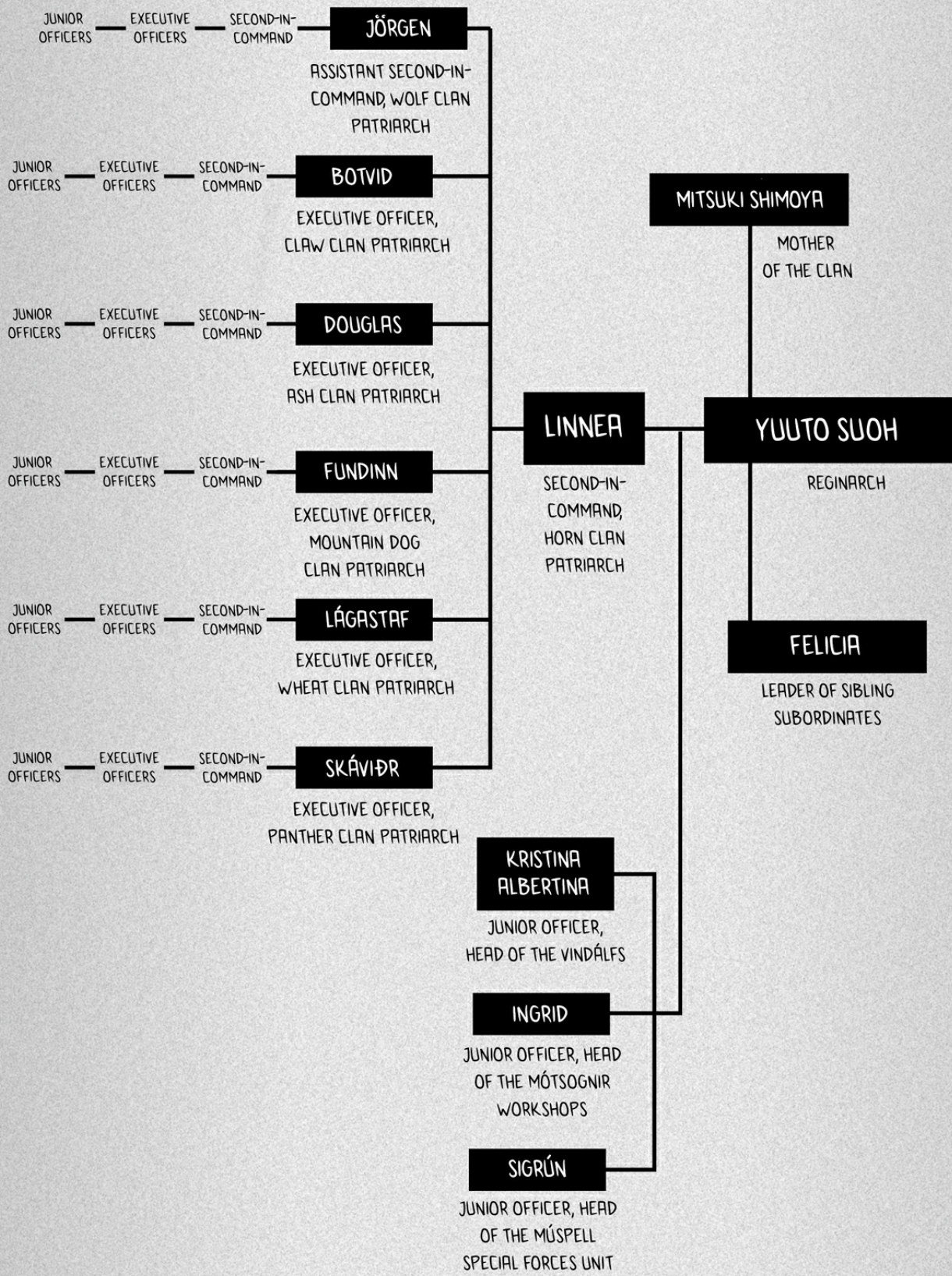


Oda Nobunaga

In Yggdrasil, he is patriarch of the Flame Clan, but everyone in Yuuto's modern world knows him as one of history's greatest figures—the legendary conqueror of Sengoku-era Japan.



HIERARCHY OF THE STEEL CLAN



PROLOGUE

The Silk Clan finds its roots along the eastern edge of the Jötunheimr region in East Yggdrasil. They made their home on the easternmost edge of Yggdrasil, and as their name implied, they were the only clan that knew the secrets behind silk manufacturing. With its distinct shine, silk was a necessity for the upper classes of Yggdrasilian society, and it was an intensely popular product that merchants from all over came to purchase.

Because the Silk Clan had a monopoly on silk production, they could sell it at whatever price they cared to name, and it would still fly off the shelves. It was such a popular product that, no matter how much they made, the supply never kept up with demand. The Silk Clan then took the enormous sums of money they gained through their silk trade and spent it lavishly on infrastructure improvements. As a result, the Silk Clan now had an immensely high level of agricultural production and an impressively large population.

Though it had only been a mere thirty years since its rise, it was counted among the Ten Great Clans.

“Hrmph. The usurper thinks to call upon us at his whims. Presumptuous little brat.”

Utgarda snorted in displeasure and tossed aside the clay tablet brought to her.

She appeared to be about seventeen or eighteen years of age—still young by all accounts—but she possessed an elegant beauty that was comparable to the glittering jewelry that adorned her person.

“But if we don’t answer the þjóðann’s summons, we could be branded as traitors...”

“You would dare to suggest that We are a traitor?”

Upon hearing Utgarda’s tone of displeasure, the man let out a short scream and paled. The man was in his mid-thirties and the fourth-highest ranked

member of the Silk Clan. He was an accomplished warrior in his own right and had the courage worthy of his powerful position. It was an extraordinary occurrence for such a man to openly show fear in public.

“M-My apologies. Suoh-Yuuto is the true traitor—a mere child who has unjustly claimed the title of þjóðann.”

Although the man hurriedly issued an apology...

“Fool,” Utgarda spat out with a lack of interest, looking down upon him as though he were little more than furniture.

“We care not for such a matter. Allow Us to ask again... What are We?”

As the cold tone of her words reached his ears, the man realized his mistake, and the blood further drained from his features. He felt the cold grip of fear squeeze at his heart and spoke with a trembling voice.

“Y-You are the most supreme reverence, the Prymr, the Great Emperor!”

“Yes, that’s correct. So why should We follow the orders of a mere þjóðann, a dusty relic of a bygone age? A traitor and usurper? Mm? Answer Us.”

After hearing what Utgarda had to say on the matter, the man couldn’t help but kowtow to her, pressing his forehead down onto the floor.

“P-Please forgive me, Your Majesty!”

Prymr was the title that Utgarda had claimed for herself. There wasn’t a single clan outside of the Silk Clan who accepted the legitimacy of the title. To put it precisely, *she* was the usurper—a patriarch who foolishly claimed the title of an emperor—but no one in the Silk Clan dared to make such an observation.

“We told you to answer Us, not apologize. We suppose that this means you’ve admitted your guilt, yes?”

Utgarda’s lips twisted into a cruel smirk. Because of her beautiful features, her smile looked all the more ruthless to the man. The very next day, the man’s head was placed on display for every denizen of the great capital of Útgardar to see. Such was the fate of all who displeased Utgarda within the Silk Clan’s realm. No matter how petty the crime, no matter the individual’s position, she showed no mercy to anyone she disliked.

For this reason, the people of the Silk Clan lived in constant fear of her. They lived in fear of their Bloody Empress.

ACT 1

It was early in the summer of Year 218 of the Imperial Era. The epic battle between the Steel Clan and the Flame Clan for total control over Yggdrasil had ended in a painful stalemate for both sides. The Steel Clan had conquered the Flame Clan's capital of Blíkjanda-Böl and forced the Flame Clan force that had besieged the Holy Capital to retreat, so from a strategic point of view, it had won, but...

"Big Brother, you should rest..."

"Not just yet. Let me work a bit longer."

Yuuto, the Steel Clan reginarch, had a tense expression upon his face.

It was true that, based on results alone, he had forced the Flame Clan Army to retreat, but when he had made the fateful decision to pursue them, he had fallen right into Nobunaga's trap and had suffered his first defeat since he had become a patriarch. The fact that Yuuto had lost Skáviðr, a loyal general who had served him since his days as the Wolf Clan's patriarch and who was also a man that had been one of his most dependable military advisers, was an enormous blow.

They were at war. He had come to terms with the possibility that he'd lose people, but he couldn't have prepared himself for just how heavy the blow would be when he lost someone close to him. He couldn't help but play the recent events back in his mind and think of what could have been had he made different decisions. At the very least, he needed to keep working to keep himself distracted.

"...I see."

Having known him for so long, it seemed Felicia understood Yuuto's frame of mind, and she asked no further questions. She turned her attention back to the stack of papers in front of her.

"Sorry. I know you're tired."

“Oh? To be alone with you is a reward for me, Big Brother.”

“...Thanks.”

Yuuto managed a smile and uttered a word of thanks.

The little act of kindness from Felicia to avoid being a burden upon him gave him a feeling of warmth that he needed in his current pain. It was times like this that Yuuto realized just how blessed he was to have the people surrounding him that he did. Yes, he had risen to the top of Yggdrasil’s hierarchy and become þjóðann, but he didn’t think for a moment that he had gotten to that rank on his own. Many people had helped him along the way.

He had been blessed with the assistance of people who had covered for his failings.

There had been those who had helped him when he was still weak and had no political power, struggling in a darkness of his own making, those who called him out when he was about to go down the wrong path, and those who had taken the hardest tasks upon themselves so he wouldn’t have to. Most importantly, more than one person had lost their lives protecting him.

It was thanks to those people that he had gotten to where he was now. He felt nothing but gratitude for them. He carried their hopes and dreams upon his shoulders. There were certain things he wanted to accomplish to repay them for all they had done. However, even if he put all of that aside, Yuuto’s own precious family was here in Yggdrasil, so he had no time to sit around and wallow in his misery. He had to protect them.

“You wish to conquer the East?!”

The announcement Yuuto made the next day caused a buzz among the assembled generals. It was understandable that they’d be surprised by this revelation. It had been just yesterday that they had managed to lift the two-month-long siege that the Flame Clan had laid upon Glaðsheimr, and what’s more, they had just barely survived their retreat after the field battle against the Flame Clan forces. Their troop numbers were in a bad way, and they were certainly in no condition to conduct a long campaign eastward.

“I understand your concerns. I know I’m asking for a lot, but this is our only opportunity to take the east,” Yuuto stated plainly.

“I see. Then, could you explain your reasoning?”

As though voicing the concerns of the others, Jörgen spoke up.

He was a frightening-looking man. He was bald and had sword scars crisscrossing his features, and—combined with his large physical size—he was a man with an aura that would make any rank-and-file soldier flee in terror. In contrast to his appearance, however, he was someone who paid attention to even the most minute of details and was well-liked by the generals.

It was also worth mentioning that he was a great man who was currently serving as the patriarch of the Wolf Clan, the largest of the Steel Clan’s member clans, and, last but not least, he was also the Assistant Second who served as third-in-command of the Steel Clan itself.

Yuuto responded to his query with a nod.

“I’m sure you realized it with the last battle, but the Flame Clan is a powerful enemy. They’re much stronger than any other opponent we’ve fought to date.”

In terms of individual fighting ability, Steinþórr was undoubtedly much stronger, and when it came to speed, the Panther Clan cavalry under Hveðrungr was superior.

As far as the morale of the soldiers under their command went, they were probably inferior to the berserkers who had fought under Fagrahvél and her rune Gjallarhorn.

When it came to overall *strength*, however, the Flame Clan under Oda Nobunaga reigned supreme.

“I’m honestly not sure if we can subdue the Flame Clan. Even if we could, I don’t know how long it would take to do so.”

The reason the Steel Clan had been able to so rapidly conquer its rivals was due to the knowledge Yuuto had brought with him and the fact that the clan had an overwhelming advantage in terms of both weaponry and tactics.

That said, after having actually fought against the Flame Clan head-on, Yuuto

had to accept that both their level of training and the number of their troops were vastly superior to the Steel Clan's own. It may have pained him to do so, but he had to nonetheless.

Yes, it was true that Yuuto had been born over four hundred years after Nobunaga, but the knowledge he had as a consequence was, in the end, just words on a page. Nobunaga, on the other hand, possessed hard-won wisdom that he had gained through decades of first-hand experience. The gap between the two was greater than Yuuto had expected, and it wasn't something that he could fill in a short span of time.

Yuuto could hear several of the generals in the room swallowing nervously. All of them were well aware of just how strong this young man—who also happened to be the youngest person in the room—was on the battlefield. Yuuto's skill as a tactician was such that they had no choice but to believe in the outrageous stories that he wasn't human, but rather a servant of the gods.

They couldn't help but shudder nervously at his admission of the enemy's strength.

"If I maaaay... If you saaay the enemy is that strooong, then wouldn't it be better for us to focus on strengthening oooour defenses against the Flaaame Clan, rather than spreaaad ourselves out too thiiin? It would be more sensible for us to hunker dooown for the time being, would it nooooot?"

The one who raised her hand and spoke in her languid lilt was none other than Bára, one of the Maidens of the Waves of the Sword Clan. In sharp contrast to her laid-back demeanor, she was a highly-regarded strategist—one of the three most impressive in all of Yggdrasil.

"Your opinion is sound," Yuuto stated, again nodding his head.

Yuuto himself understood that it was reckless to expend any more of the Steel Clan's military strength to maintain a campaign in eastern Yggdrasil when they were already at war with a powerful enemy like the Flame Clan. If he didn't know any better, Yuuto would have probably adopted Bára's strategy.

"But we don't have the time to work so leisurely."

"You meaaaaan the fact that Yggdrasil will soooon sink into the seaaaaa, yes?"

“Exactly. The disaster is fast approaching, so we need to start sending our people out of Yggdrasil and to our new homeland. To do that, we need to take control over Jötunheimr and its ports as soon as possible, even if it means doing things that might be particularly risky in the process.”

As Yuuto explained his thinking, the room began to fill with the sound of murmured conversation.

They understood Yuuto’s reasoning. He had already revealed this fact to his trusted generals after the wedding ceremony with Rífa, but it was still such a ridiculous idea that only those from the Wolf Clan truly believed it. Those among them from the other clans, frankly, still had their doubts about his story.

It was fine if it were simply the mad ramblings of the þjóðann (well, it wasn’t *technically* fine), but it was another thing entirely to plan to move all of the land’s denizens without exception based on such ramblings.

Honestly, it would have been somewhat problematic if they didn’t have their doubts about the wisdom of those plans. They may have taken the Oath of the Chalice and become children of Yuuto, but they still found it difficult to accept the notion of abandoning the lands that they knew so well and participating in Yuuto’s mass migration along with their subjects.

Of course, Yuuto had already accounted for this. Well over six months ago, in fact.

“I’m sure that you all have your reservations regarding my plan, but I have no intention of bending on this matter. This...is a direct command from the þjóðann,” Yuuto declared with a tone that allowed no room for dissent of any sort.

If he had wanted to open a route to the European continent, then, geographically speaking, he should have just ignored Glaðsheimr and immediately focused his efforts toward conquering the eastern regions of Yggdrasil. The fact that he had gone out of his way to take Glaðsheimr and claimed the title of þjóðann wasn’t for Rífa’s sake. Of course, he did want to help her at the time, but as a patriarch, he couldn’t gamble his country for the sake of one woman. Yuuto had taken the title of þjóðann in order to obtain absolute authority, strengthen his power base, and in the worst case, force his

children to listen to him.

“Well... If you’re going to go that far...”

“A direct command from the þjóðann, you say? Very well.”

“You need not resort to such measures. We’ve always been ready to march into fire or water on your orders, Father.”

Even the skeptical generals nodded their assent, just as he had expected. It was very likely they still harbored some measure of doubt in their hearts, but he didn’t care so long as they were willing to follow his orders.

“Forgive me. I know I’m asking quite a lot of you. I’m sincerely grateful for your loyalty. I’ve been blessed with wonderful children.”

Yuuto nodded magnanimously and made certain to show his appreciation to his generals.

On this matter, Yuuto was well aware that he was making unreasonable demands, and it was a delicate issue that could very well lead to rebellion if he misplayed his hand. People will never follow a leader who rules only through fear. If his sworn children abandoned him, then his plan would immediately fall to pieces.

That said, people would also never follow a leader who was too forgiving and showed no spine. Striking the right balance between being benevolent and being merciless was the key to the emigration plan’s success, and it was the most difficult problem that he faced when it came to executing the plan. The relief he had felt from the fact that he had somehow managed to strike that very balance today lasted but a moment.

“I understaaaand Your Majesty’s determination to conquer the East. But hooow specifically do you intend to hold baaaack the Flame Clan? Based on the most recent baaattle, they don’t seeeeeem the sort to sit back and naaaap while we’re busy in the Eaaast.”

Bára made a sharp observation, one in great contrast to her languid tone. She was completely unconcerned by the fact that the mood throughout the room had lent itself toward enacting Yuuto’s plans to conquer the eastern regions. That was to be expected of one of the most cunning strategists in Yggdrasil, of

course.

Even so, Yuuto was happy to deal with the question head-on. If there were holes in his plan, then he wanted Bára to help fill them.

“You’re right. But given that Rún has taken the Flame Clan’s breadbasket, their capital of Blíkjanda-Böl, they won’t be able to conduct large-scale operations due to food supply issues.”

In particular, they had just finished harvesting their winter wheat crop. Yuuto knew it would be difficult to maintain the Flame Clan’s large army without finding a new source of grain. Of course, there was the possibility that Oda Nobunaga, the eccentric genius that he was, would come up with some brilliant solution that Yuuto hadn’t considered, but even Nobunaga couldn’t produce food from nothing.

“The lack of food is certainly an issue, but so is having the enemy occupy their homeland. It’d be quite a blow to their morale. First things first, they’ll focus on taking back their clan capital.”

It’s said that what had finally stopped the conquests of Alexander the Great was not the presence of an external enemy, but his soldiers’ desire to return home.

Even though the Flame Clan’s soldiers were trained so well that it shocked someone like Yuuto—and no matter if their army was made up of elite soldiers that were extremely well-led—if their homeland was being occupied by the enemy, even they would be concerned with their homes and be too distracted to focus on their current campaign. Nobunaga wasn’t so foolish as to send his men out on a long campaign while leaving that issue burning in the backs of their minds.

“As a contingency measure, I’ll be leaving twenty thousand troops here in Glaðsheimr. Jörgen will be placed in overall command with Fagrahvél as his Second, while I’ll also leave you to serve as their tactical adviser.”

“I see. Those two should be moooore than enouuuugh. While my skills are limited, I’ll do my beeeest to protect the capital as well.”

Bára briefly blinked her eyes in thought, then, as though accepting Yuuto’s

reasoning, made a show of bowing to him.

Jörgen, as the Assistant Second of the Steel Clan, was well-acquainted with the patriarchs of the other clans, and he was greatly respected by all of them. Fagrahvél had an ace in the hole in the form of her rune, Gjallarhorn, while Bára had excellent abilities as a strategist and could provide support for them in military planning.

Even if Nobunaga attacked while Yuuto wasn't present, they wouldn't be caught flat-footed by an army that had supply issues. From Yuuto's perspective, it was a perfect defensive force.

"So, next I'd like to move on to the specifics of our campaign in the East... Kris, give us the rundown on Jötunheimr."

With that, Yuuto turned to the girl standing to his left flank. She was a young and delicate girl who looked out of place among the grizzled veteran generals of the Steel Clan. Still, there was no doubt that she'd grow into a great beauty in about five years or so, and her eyes had a coolness and intelligence that belied her age. Her name was Kristina.

While she was indeed young, she was the legitimate head of the Vindálfs—also known as the Wind Fairies—the Steel Clan's intelligence agency, and was also the brilliant young mind that served as Yuuto's eyes and ears.

"Very well. Currently, Jötunheimr is ruled over by the Armor, Shield, Tiger, and Silk Clans."

Kristina had her subordinate next to her spread out a large map, and she began pointing to each clan.

"Out of those, the western clans—that is, the Armor and Shield Clans—have indicated their wish to follow the imperial edict issued by His Majesty, and we have received messages to the effect that their patriarchs wish to come to the capital to pay their respects to His Majesty," Kristina explained. "While they had initially decided to see how our battle with the Flame Clan would play out, no doubt they have finally realized that the winds favor the Steel Clan after observing that we had conquered the Flame Clan capital and forced the Flame Clan Army to retreat from the Holy Capital."

Jörgen placed his hand over his mouth and let out an amused chuckle.

“It’s been a while, but she’s still got quite the mouth on her. The vixen.”

In Japan, there were sayings to the effect that the walls and doors had ears and that one couldn’t stop rumors from spreading. Given that the Armor and Shield Clans were joining hands with the Steel Clan, it was highly likely that Kristina’s words would reach the ears of members of those two clans. No doubt they’d be displeased to learn of Kristina’s insult. While the Armor and Shield Clans weren’t counted among the Ten Great Clans, they were still powerful, distinguished clans in their own right that were descended from key retainers at the founding of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire. There was a good chance that they’d be given positions of some merit within the Steel Clan, and Kristina wasn’t so foolish as to not understand that fact.

“But it’s true, isn’t it? Had they made their allegiances clear earlier, the most recent battle would have gone much more smoothly, after all.”

Despite that, she was casually making such blunt observations.

It wasn’t just Jörgen who found the observations gratifying. Several of those present also chuckled dryly. Kristina was saying the things that they, in their positions, couldn’t say.

“You were blessed to be born looking nothing like your father, but you completely ruin it with your acerbic wit. You’ll struggle to find a husband, I’d imagine.”

“Oh, but I’m quite certain it’s that ‘acerbic wit’ in particular that Father so values.”

At Jörgen’s pointed comment, Kristina quipped back without so much as batting an eye.

“Well, that’s quite true. Whether or not I’ll take you as a consort is another matter entirely, however,” Yuuto said as he nodded with a shrug of his shoulders.

Many of the reports that others brought in front of Yuuto tended to be full of flattery and devoid of details that were inconvenient to him, whether out of a desire to curry favor with him as the þjóðann and reginarch or out of a desire to

protect their own careers or interests. However, as far as Yuuto was concerned, such efforts were unwanted and, if anything, actively harmful. This was due to one very important fact: if he made calculations based on the flawed information they would present him, the results would, obviously, be flawed as well. Contrary to the others, Kristina's reports were always frank and got straight to the point.

"Oh? You won't take me as your consort?"

"Even I don't have the courage to take you as one of mine. Far too frightening."

"Oh my! If you won't have me, Father, what am I to do?"

"I'm sure you'll manage."

"How cruel! So you'll do all you want to me and then toss me aside, is that right?"

"You'll give people the wrong idea. I'm not a pedophile," Yuuto protested.

"But it's true that you have me do all sorts of things, isn't it?"

"In terms of gathering information, yeah!"

"How awful! You made me break down crying two months ago!" Kristina blurted out, further adding to the misunderstandings.

"You're the one that's awful!"

"Okay, maybe we should end this little charade now..."

"You think? Sure."

Yuuto couldn't keep up with her ever-changing act and just slumped his shoulders, defeated.

Yuuto took back his previous sentiment. When she was teasing people, Kristina was very capable of using flowery language and telling white lies to further her own mischievous ends. Frighteningly so...



What made it worse was that her comments weren't even technically lies. It would seem that with her older sister off working on naval matters, she'd made Yuuto the new target of her fun and games.

"Ahem. It's fine that you two are close, but there are others present."

Jörgen coughed and gestured with his gaze to the room around them.

Yuuto followed Jörgen's gaze and found several people in the group staring blankly, as though they'd just witnessed something utterly unbelievable.

It was understandable, really. While those among them from the Wolf Clan had seen such scenes play out many times before, for those who hadn't, they couldn't see it as anything less than totally bizarre. After all, they were witnessing a child subordinate directing all sorts of lighthearted remarks toward their parent—and not just any parent either. Yuuto was a great hero who held the titles of both reginarch and þjóðann.

"You're right. Sorry about that. I'll make sure she learns her lesson," Yuuto said, apologizing for the inappropriate spectacle that had just unfolded.

"Wai—Father! Ow! That really hurts!"

For now, Yuuto simply grabbed the back of Kristina's head and squeezed.

While Yuuto no longer felt the need to treat every quip as a slight—and a potential threat to his authority as patriarch—certain limits and etiquette still needed to be respected. There were lines even the closest of his children weren't allowed to cross in public. It set a bad example for the others, after all.

"Oh, not at all. I should be the one to apologize. This began as a result of my remark."

"Indeed! The Assistant Second is just as guil—ooooowww!"

"...Let's get back on topic. Kris, inform us of what you've learned about the East."

After a few moments to allow for things to settle back down, Yuuto let go of Kristina.

"Hmph. Very well."

Kristina made an exaggerated show of holding the back of her head, but at the end of the day, she was an Einherjar. In all likelihood, it probably didn't hurt that much, but it seemed she read the mood in the room.

"In the eastern part of Jötunheimr, while the Tiger Clan was very civil, they politely rejected any requests for obedience or an audience," Kristina stated. "The Silk Clan, however, outright rejected our edict, stating that 'We have no intention of following the orders of a usurper.'"

The Ash Clan's patriarch, Douglas, snorted derisively. "Oh? One can forgive the Tiger Clan, but the Silk Clan or whatever are rather pretentious for a mere Jötunheimr clan."

The Steel Clan already held the Álfheimr and Bifröst regions as well as the northern half of the Ásgarðr region, and they would soon add the Armor, Shield, and Helm Clans to their ranks. Douglas was practically convinced that the Silk Clan was being led by fools who couldn't truly appreciate the difference in scale between their two clans. After all, no ruler in their right mind would spit in the face of a clan as mighty as the Steel Clan.

"Douglas, it's best not to underestimate them."

"Oh? I find it difficult to believe they have the forces to oppose us."

Upon hearing what Yuuto had to say on the matter, Douglas turned a curious gaze to him.

Looking upon the map, it was true that the Silk Clan's territories were only about as large as the Sword Clan's. Sure, it was impressive that they had realms comparable to the Sword Clan, known as one of the Ten Great Clans, but even the Sword Clan was just one clan among many.

The Steel Clan was able to beat back a simultaneous invasion from not only that very Sword Clan, but also the combined forces of six other clans in tandem. Even Yuuto couldn't hold back a certain amount of anticlimactic disappointment at the size of the enemy. However—

"If wars were determined by the size of the clan's territory, the Wolf Clan would have ceased to exist a long time ago."

"...It is as you say, Father, but the Wolf Clan only survived because they had a

remarkable individual like you as their patriarch.”

“There’s certainly a possibility that the Silk Clan has someone like that in their ranks themselves. After all, there are examples like the Flame Clan’s Oda Nobunaga and the Lightning Clan’s Steinþórr.”

“Y-Yes, that is very true, Father...” Douglas said, a groan escaping his lips.

“All I’m trying to say is that you shouldn’t let your guard down. As I learned from bitter experience the other day, you never know what’ll happen in war,” Yuuto said as he shrugged his shoulders and let slip a dry laugh.

Though Yuuto had largely intended the comment to serve as a warning to Douglas and the others present about not allowing themselves to become overconfident, it also served as a reminder to himself to not repeat past mistakes.

“At the very least, the Silk Clan has something that the other clans don’t. If you form your opinions based solely on what you see on the map, you’ll misread their strength.”

“They have something other clans don’t? Not even the Steel Clan?” Jörgen asked skeptically.

In Jörgen’s eyes, Yuuto’s knowledge was far beyond that of the norm in Yggdrasil. It seemed that he was finding it hard to grasp the concept that another clan, one that wasn’t even as technologically advanced as their own, would have something that the Steel Clan, led by someone like Yuuto, didn’t.

“That they do. It would seem, as their name suggests, that they know how to manufacture silk.”

“I see. Then we can’t underestimate them.”

Jörgen’s expression tensed.

Jörgen was a man who had a great wealth of experience in clan governance—initially as the Second of the Wolf Clan, and then as the Assistant Second of the Steel Clan. He knew well that silk was a luxury commodity that was traded at prices well above that of the glass that the Steel Clan had effectively monopolized. From there, it was quite easy for Jörgen to imagine just how

much wealth that silk would be generating for the Silk Clan.

“Since it was a far-off clan that we have had no prior interaction with until now, even I don’t have a good grasp of their internal situation,” Kristina continued. “However, according to the spies I’ve sent there, their people are well-fed and appear to be rather healthy. Their standard of living is quite high, and their capital city is very prosperous. It seems safe to consider them an extremely wealthy clan.”

“Seems like they’re well-governed.” Jörgen crossed his arms and nodded.

“While their patriarch is still only seventeen years of age, it would appear that, based upon her reputation with her people, she’s quite the skilled leader.”

“What an interesting coincidence. She’s the same age as Father.”

“That’s not quite true. Since age is counted by the calendar year in Yggdrasil and starts at one, she’s actually two years younger than I am.”

“Either way, she’s quite young.” Jörgen furrowed his brow in thought.

Yggdrasil’s patriarch successors were generally not hereditary but were selected based on their skill. If she had managed to climb to the top at that age, having pushed aside all sorts of experienced and skilled veterans, then it must have meant that she was immensely talented. It certainly didn’t take someone with Jörgen’s knowledge and experience to understand that the Silk Clan’s patriarch wasn’t someone that should be dismissed.

“Her name is Utgarda. She became patriarch three years ago. She’s the daughter of the previous patriarch, Loki.”

“Ah, a hereditary ruler. While I won’t dismiss that as folly... What is she actually like?”

There were plenty of examples of rulers making their beloved children their successors despite their lack of ability, but this was a ruthless age where only the strong survived. In most cases, clans suffered under the rule of such hereditary patriarchs.

“As I mentioned earlier, she’s quite skilled. Since the succession was forced upon them, the Second at the time didn’t accept her ascension to the throne as

patriarch, which resulted in a civil war that split the clan in two, but she quickly quelled the rebellion. Soon after, she decimated the Tiger Clan Army that had opportunistically invaded the Silk Clan.”

“Well... It would seem that she’s quite the tactician, then.”

“As far as her ability to govern goes, she made quick work of the bureaucrats who were engaging in corruption, as well as making her city more peaceful by setting harsher punishments for various crimes. Most people agreed that the country had become a better place to live under her reign.”

“Hmm... She sounds like quite the competent ruler. Can’t underestimate her despite her youth. Are there any bad rumors about her?” Jörgen asked as though in confirmation.

A commonly employed tactic was to exploit an enemy’s weakness before ultimately bringing them down. While he was known as an agreeable and calm man, as the patriarch of a clan, Jörgen had a more Machiavellian side.

“It seems she’s not well regarded by her children. She’s quite feared by them for her extreme stance of ‘liquidating’ anyone who she doesn’t like. In the Silk Clan, it’s considered to effectively be a death sentence to curry her displeasure.”

“I see. But that’s not really a weakness. Excess ruthlessness may be a problem, but a certain level of harshness is necessary for a patriarch.”

“That strikes a bit close to home.”

As he listened to Jörgen speak, Yuuto let out a dry laugh. After all, there was the matter earlier with Kristina. Yuuto was well aware that he was a bit too forgiving as a ruler. It was something he struggled with.

“Pardon? I don’t know anyone quite as frightening as you, Father,” Jörgen replied with a blank look of confusion.

“Indeed. You’re the one man I don’t want as my enemy.”

Botvid nodded intently in agreement.

“Yes. Even my Maidens of the Waves, who have faced down countless battles, say they felt their blood run cold when they first came face to face with you,

Father,” Fagrahvél of the Sword Clan said, as though it had stirred a memory.

“I’ve sworn never to anger you, Father. There’s no creature in existence with enough lives to survive that,” Bruno, the head elder of the Wolf Clan, said with a tremor in voice, his features pale. The others in the room nodded along with him in agreement.

“Huh? You know you don’t need to flatter me, right? I keep telling you I don’t like that sort of thing.”

Yuuto shook his head and waved his hand dismissively.

It was a moment where he felt the isolation of being a ruler. No one would dare speak the truth to him. And yet, through all of that, Felicia gazed in at Yuuto’s pouty expression and chuckled.

“What is it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. You haven’t changed despite becoming þjóðann, Big Brother.”

Yuuto couldn’t grasp what she meant and merely blinked in confusion.

“Well, damn, things are certainly getting complicated.”

The Tiger Clan patriarch, Menglød, let out a bitter sigh as he looked down upon the army spread out below him.

Menglød was thirty-seven years old. It had been three years since he’d ascended to the throne as the Tiger Clan’s patriarch. While he had dealt with some minor issues during that time, he had been able to govern his clan without any major issues, but recent events had left the fate of his clan somewhat murky.

Two weeks earlier, the Silk Clan had suddenly invaded the Tiger Clan’s territory.

“Tch! Where the hell had she been hiding this many soldiers?” Menglød murmured as he furrowed his brow.

Against a giant invading army numbering over twenty thousand, the fortresses on the Silk-Tiger Clan border had fallen quickly. The Silk Clan Army

had now surrounded the Tiger Clan capital of Gastropnir, and the outlook for Menglød and the Tiger Clan was, to put it mildly, grim.

“Father! We should move out and fight them head-on!”

“I agree! Let’s wipe them out and show them the true strength of the Tiger Clan!”

The two retainers had gotten themselves riled up and were insisting he take action—their emotions clear as day thanks to the aggressive glint he could spy in their eyes. In their youth, they certainly had the privilege of being able to act recklessly, but...

“Enough of that. First of all, take a good look at the difference in our numbers,” Menglød pointed out in an effort to talk them down as he let slip a dry chuckle.

The remaining Tiger Clan forces stationed in and around the capital of Gastropnir numbered roughly five thousand. This amounted to a mere quarter of the number that their enemy could field. Trying to take on a force four times their size would do nothing more than make those warriors into martyrs.

“You’re the one who’s always said that wars aren’t decided by numbers, Father!”

Struggling for an answer after the men’s critique, Menglød scratched at his head for a moment.

“Well... About that...”

Certainly, he recalled saying that a lot.

He had done so because he wanted his men to face off against their enemies without cowering and to have the strength to never give up even when the odds were against them. It wasn’t just for that reason, though. It was also to avoid having them grow overconfident when they had the advantage of superior numbers.

“It’s always a matter of time and circumstances. Against that venomous snake, we’re not gonna be able to overcome a gap in numbers as large as this.”

“They took our last patriarch’s life, what’s there to be so afraid of?! Aren’t you

angry that you have to turn tail and run against a woman?!”

“Of course I’m angry! Feelings alone don’t win wars, though!”

“We won’t know until we try!”

“We already do! You’d know for yourself if you’d taken part in the battle three years ago...”

When the Tiger Clan had invaded the Silk Clan in an attempt to take advantage of the civil war that had been unfolding within their lands, Menglød had been part of that invasion force and had seen for himself just how mighty a force the Silk Clan patriarch, Utgarda, was on the battlefield.

The Tiger Clan had attacked with superior numbers against an opponent whose forces were very much depleted by the effects of their recent civil war. It should have been a winnable fight.

Despite everything being in their favor, the result was a disaster. The Tiger Clan had fallen for the enemy’s numerous surprise tactics, and they had lost Menglød’s beloved Father, the previous patriarch, and the Second who had been tapped to become the next patriarch. The Tiger Clan forces could do little more than crawl home, merely the tattered remnants of a once-large army. It was the most bitter ordeal that Menglød had experienced in his life so far.

“The only real option we have at the moment is to hole up and defend. There shouldn’t be anything to worry about. Even that snake doesn’t have a force powerful enough to conquer Gastropnir.”

Menglød quirked his lips up into a confident smile.

The Tiger Clan capital of Gastropnir had a long history, predating the rise of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, and its walls had been steadily reinforced over the generations.

While the scale of the city proper could barely hold a candle to Glaðsheimr, its walls—both in terms of their height and thickness—easily rivaled, and possibly even *surpassed*, the walls that enveloped the Holy Capital. It was highly unlikely that even an army twenty-thousand strong led by the cunning Utgarda would be able to breach its defenses.

“Even so, with pretty much no chance of reinforcements showing up, wouldn’t holing up inside the city merely be delaying the inevitable?”

In general, hunkering down like that was done with the expectation of eventually being relieved by reinforcements. Of course, there were examples of the enemy having no way to breach the defenses, which would result in them giving up and retreating, but they couldn’t rely upon that outcome this time around.

The Silk Clan had enough food to feed even the lowliest members of their clan. That meant they could maintain a siege for a year or two if they so desired. No matter how one looked at it, it was obvious that the Tiger Clan would be the one forced to surrender from a lack of supplies.

“In that case, isn’t it better to charge out there and cling to the slight chance that we can pull off a miracle?”

“We’ve got a chance though. A chance of being reinforced, that is.”

At Menglød’s answer, his bodyguard let out a surprised, “Huh?” in response.

He was likely having trouble thinking of who the reinforcements that Menglød referred to could possibly be. After all, the Tiger Clan currently had no allied clans with whom they’d exchanged the Oath of the Chalice.

“We’re gonna rely on His Majesty the þjóðann,” Menglød said and winked.

It was a heartening gesture when done by this man who looked very much the part of the patriarch of the Tiger Clan.

“Do you think he’ll send help in a timely enough manner...?” the bodyguard asked and skeptically furrowed his brow.

His reaction was understandable. After all, the Tiger Clan had essentially had no interaction with the Steel Clan. They had also politely but firmly rejected the demand for the Tiger Clan to come to pay tribute to it. No doubt the bodyguard was wondering just how Menglød was planning to ask for that help.

“He’ll come,” Menglød said with total certainty.

The edict that he had received had banned conflicts between the various clans. It further went on to say that those who disobeyed that edict would be

harshly punished by the empire.

And what, precisely, was currently unfolding right in front of them?

“If he won’t follow through on something he’s declared so publicly, his authority as þjóðann will take a pretty hard hit. He has no choice but to come to our aid. I’ve already dispatched a messenger to inform them. Waiting for those reinforcements is our best shot of getting out of this mess.”

“Ah! What a great plan, Father! So you’ve already taken steps.”

“Course I did.”

Menglød let out a confident snort.

By any measure, Menglød’s judgment was sound, and he had acted quickly. This made for a good showcase of his skills as a patriarch. However—

“Father! They’ve broken through the gate! Enemy troops are pouring in!”

“What?!”

As one of his child subordinates dashed in to make their report, Menglød’s eyes widened in shock.

This was impossible. As previously mentioned, Gastropnir’s defenses were among the toughest in Yggdrasil. It shouldn’t have been possible for an enemy to break through them in the space of a single day.

“How in the blazes did that happen?!”

“Uncle Þjazi—No, that *bastard* Þjazi betrayed us and let the enemy in!”

“Wha...?!”

Menglød had finally been struck dumb with shock.

Þjazi served as the clan’s Leader of Subordinates and was one of the most important members of the Tiger Clan. He was a dear comrade who had taken the chalice with the clan’s previous patriarch at about the same time as Menglød. They had shared the highs and lows of those years, trusting one another implicitly on the battlefield.

Menglød simply couldn’t believe it. He didn’t *want* to believe it, in fact, but...

“Ahhhh!”

“Guh!”

“Eeeep!”

As he heard the wave of shouts and cries echoing from the gates, Menglød had to accept the reality of what was currently unfolding around him. The Tiger Clan’s soldiers were all caught completely off guard by the sudden flood of enemy soldiers. They were in total disarray. The situation was extremely grim.

“Dammit. We’ll head to the gate. The only real plan of action we have is to push them back and close...”

Just as Menglød was about to climb down from the watchtower, he noticed the silhouette blocking the exit. The face of the person standing there was one he knew very well.

“Tsk tsk. Not so fast, Big Bro.”

It all made sense now. Pjazi would have known he was here.

“Hah. There’s no point in trying to resist. Even you won’t be able to win against a force this large.”

Pjazi’s expression quickly shifted into a malicious smile. Behind him stood a hundred grizzled veterans.

“Looks like it... But I can still kill you, at least.”

With that comment, Menglød drew the sword on his hip and slashed at Pjazi. Menglød was an Einherjar who was reputed to be the greatest warrior in the Tiger Clan. He struck out with a lightning-quick slash.

“Heh.”

However, Pjazi was a warrior who matched him in strength. He was able to respond to Menglød’s attack in kind. Their swords clashed, and...

“Wha?!”

Menglød was the one who let out a shocked cry, and with good cause. The beloved sword that he had trusted his life to had snapped in half from a single blow.

“Looks like I win.”

“Grr!”

With Þjazi’s blade held right against his throat, Menglød clenched his teeth. However, he was less concerned with the fact that he had lost. Rather, he was fixated solely on the thing that had just caught his attention.

“That shimmer...”

“Yes, it’s steel. The Silk Clan has discovered the secrets of iron smelting.”

Þjazi smirked.

A quick glance around told Menglød that the men behind Þjazi were all armed with the same weaponry. The star-metal that came from meteors was an extremely rare and valuable material. It was difficult to believe, but it wouldn’t have been possible to gather enough material to arm this many soldiers with weapons like those if they didn’t have a way to make iron, as Þjazi had said.

With the Silk Clan’s men being fully outfitted with steel weapons, it was only a matter of time before the clan capital fell. The quality of their weaponry was simply far too impressive by comparison.

“The Tiger Clan never had a chance to start with.”

“Hrmph, so you betrayed your clan and got in with the winning side, eh? You’re a coward and a traitor!”

Menglød spat at Þjazi. He effortlessly avoided it and smiled triumphantly.

“All the better than to be slaughtered during some futile attempt at resistance. Heh, rest easy. I’ll protect the Tiger Clan as its patriarch once you’re gone, with Utgarda by my side.”

“Letting that snake of a woman seduce you into breaking your oath... You’ve fallen as far as you can fall.”

“Hah! Say whatever you want. I never wanted to take your chalice to begin with.”

Þjazi spat on the ground.

Menglød and Þjazi were of the same age and were rivals of equal skill. When

the previous patriarch had died in battle, Menglød had been chosen to succeed him, but many pushed for Pjazi to instead bear that torch. The gap between the two in terms of support had been small. Pjazi himself had probably never come to terms with it. It had likely been eating away at him all this time.

The Silk Clan's Utgarda had recognized Pjazi's ambition and had used sweet words to take advantage of him.

"Frightening bitch, that one..." Menglød said with a sigh and gazed up at the sky.

Even the toughest fortification was brittle if undermined from within. It was easy enough to understand how it had happened, but what had truly shocked Menglød to his core was that a girl who was still in her teens had been the one to pull it off. It took less than two hours after Menglød's defeat for Silk Clan banners to go up all around Gastropnir.

"Ah, there you are. It's thanks to you that I'm able to sit on this throne. I appreciate it."

Pjazi lounged on the throne and welcomed the girl into the palace. He carried himself as though he was now the rightful patriarch of the Tiger Clan. His expression was filled with confidence and the satisfaction of accomplishing a long-cherished goal.

This was probably the best day of Pjazi's life.

"We see. Glad to hear it."

In stark contrast, the girl spoke with little emotion noticeable in her voice at all.

Pjazi felt something was off with the girl's attitude, but he'd heard that women had a time of the month when they were moody. He figured it was something to do with that and didn't give it much further thought. He had more pressing things on his mind at the moment, after all.

"So, when's the wedding?" Pjazi asked directly.

This was the secret agreement that Pjazi had entered into with the girl—with

Utgarda.

Many of the people of the Tiger Clan would no doubt brand him a traitor who'd sold out the clan to their enemy, but from Pjazi's point of view, he was a true patriot who was willing to take on the dishonorable title of traitor to protect the Tiger Clan.

Just as this recent war had shown, the Silk Clan was substantially more powerful than the Tiger Clan. Even if Pjazi hadn't betrayed the Tiger Clan, it would have only been a matter of time before the clan had been destroyed. Pjazi had been the one who'd kept that from happening.

Though the Tiger Clan would temporarily be a vassal of the Silk Clan, it would also be the clan of its patriarch's husband. They wouldn't treat the Tiger Clan too poorly.

Even if Utgarda was skilled in both political and military strategy, she was still a sheltered seventeen-year-old girl. Pjazi could use the techniques that he'd gained through his countless dalliances over the years to make her a slave to him and eventually grasp power for himself.

There was more to leading than just fighting. He would be known as the savior of the Tiger Clan—

“Wedding? What are you talking about?”

“...What?” Pjazi asked with a tremor in his voice.

Utgarda's cold tone completely pulled Pjazi out of his self-indulgent thoughts and back to reality. The worst-case scenario had begun playing out in his head.

“H-Hey... Hey now! That was the promise, wasn't it?”

“We don't recall making such a promise.”

“D-Don't be ridiculous! We...”

“It seems that you jumped to conclusions. We only said that We would consider it. That it could be a solution to keep your people's rebellion to a minimum,” Utgarda said casually while fanning herself with peacock feathers.

Pjazi felt the blood rush to his face in anger.

“Y-You bitch! Did you lie to me?!”

“How rude. You were the one who presumed to know Our intentions.”

“Grrr...”

“Besides, what value do you have for Us now? Even if we two ruled jointly, who among your people would follow a traitor? As for Us and the people of the Silk Clan, how can you—a man who betrayed his chalice oath—possibly be trusted? We see no value in a man whom We cannot trust. Given that you have no tangible value, why should We marry you at this point?”

Utgarda made her disdain clear as she let out a grim chuckle. It was at this late moment that Pjazi finally realized that he’d simply been dancing to her tune. He was little more than some cheap puppet. The gazes she’d directed at him as though she was interested in him, her attitude, even her words that implied she saw something in him, were all lies to get him to move as she intended.

Pjazi felt a chill as the blood drained from his face before he felt a flash of white-hot anger bubble up from within him like a lava flow.

“D...D...Daaaaammit!”

With a mad roar, Pjazi drew the sword on his hip and lunged at Utgarda. It was an impressive display of speed that reflected his power as an Einherjar, but —

Clang!

One of Utgarda’s retainers stepped in to protect her and blocked Pjazi’s sword with his own. It was a move worthy of a patriarch’s retainer. That single exchange was enough for Pjazi to realize that his opponent was quite skilled. His instincts as a warrior were telling him as much. Then, just as Pjazi turned to face the skilled opponent...

“Guh?!”

Seeking to take advantage of the opening, Utgarda swiftly stepped into Pjazi’s range and struck her elbow into his solar plexus. The pain of the strike left him winded, and Pjazi quickly collapsed to his knees. It was a blow of such force that

he couldn't believe it had come from the girl.

Utgarda immediately issued orders to the soldiers behind her.

"Arrest them all."

Pjazi's force was completely outnumbered. As Silk Clan soldiers filed into the room, his men were immediately subdued.

"Urk."

Pjazi himself was also pinned to the ground by three soldiers. Utgarda gazed arrogantly down at him and spoke.

"Rejoice. We are a just and merciful ruler. Typically, drawing your sword upon Us would be considered a sacrilegious act worthy of being executed ten times over. Your countless acts of disrespect toward Us cannot be ignored either. However, in light of your valuable contributions to our conquest of Gastropnir, We shall make an exception and let you live."

In contrast to her words, Utgarda's lips had quirked up in a cruel smirk, and her voice was filled with malice. Pjazi felt a shudder run up his spine as he imagined the worst. However, it was soon revealed that even his most morbid considerations hadn't accounted for Utgarda's cruelty.

"Gather the people of Gastropnir in the square. We shall conduct a public execution of the Tiger Clan leadership."

"Wha?!"

The color drained from Pjazi's face.

"That's not what we agreed to! You promised that you'd show mercy if we swore fealty to the Silk Clan!"

"We had already come to this realization, but you really are a fool. Don't make Us repeat ourselves. How can We place Our trust in those who swear fealty to two lords? Such loyalty is but a facade."

"Ngh... No..."

Pjazi had been fooled on every front. Out of sheer frustration, Pjazi began to weep as he let out grunts of pain.

Pjazi had sworn, as a man, that he'd never let anyone see him cry, but despite that principle, the situation he was in had become so dire that he couldn't hold back his tears. Upon seeing him weep, Utgarda's lips twisted from a smirk into a malicious grin.

"Hah! Wonderful! That's the expression We wanted to see on your face! The sight of a confident man who was so certain of his strength bemoaning his lack of power and, finally, bursting out sobbing in public... There's nothing quite so entertaining! Truly brilliant!"

Utgarda cackled in heartfelt amusement.

Pjazi felt nothing but shame. He had been fooled by this woman's beauty and sweet words, and in doing so, had let the Silk Clan into the city. As a result, he had become the direct cause for the downfall of his clan and the deaths of his sworn siblings and children. Regret flooded like a torrent into his heart.

"Y-You can do anything you want to me! I'll take any torture you dish out! So please... Please don't kill them!"

He couldn't stop himself from senselessly shouting out to her—pleading with her to stop. If he could save the lives of his sworn siblings and children, he didn't care what happened to him. He would willingly take any punishment if it meant he could protect them.

"My, such an admirable sentiment."

Utgarda nodded as though impressed by Pjazi's plea.

"Th-Then..."

"That cannot be done, however. They all must die. We must teach the people of the Tiger Clan that they have new rulers, and We must show them the cost of disobedience."

She showed not a trace of pity as she voiced her rejection.

"Please... No!"

Pjazi knew it had been in vain. He knew what sort of woman Utgarda was, but he still had to cling to the possibility of her granting them some form of mercy. In the end, though, his hopes had been dashed. Utgarda was reveling in his

despair.

Pjazi bit through his lip in anger and tasted the iron tang of blood.

“Ah, though that may be the case, We shall honor your sentiment by allowing you to watch the proceedings. We shall even grant you a place at the front. Such a lovely gift, is it not?”

Utgarda looked down upon Pjazi with a thoroughly wicked smirk as she delivered that coup de grâce. Pjazi shuddered at the sight of the demonic woman staring down at him. No, not even a demon would be this cruel. He would be forced to watch as the sworn siblings and children he had grown up with stared at him with hatred in the face of their impending deaths. Just imagining the scene was enough to drive him mad.

Pjazi could do nothing to change what was about to happen, however. This woman would force him to witness the executions for no reason other than to grant herself some form of sadistic gratification. Pjazi was about to be thrust into a hell that was far worse than death.

“Heheh, did you see it? The haggard look on Pjazi’s face! Even his tears had run dry! Did you hear him? The screams each time his comrades were put to the sword?! Simply wonderful!”

On Gastropnir’s throne, Utgarda broke into manic laughter, pattering her arms and legs in amusement. She looked much like an innocent child delighting in something pleasant, but her words were malignant in the extreme.

“My, what fun that was! It has been quite a while since We’ve laughed so much!”

Wiping away the tears in her eyes, Utgarda finally calmed herself down and took a breath. She immediately burst out into laughter again, however, as though triggered by a memory. It seemed that the “show” had been to her liking. She continued to laugh, thoroughly basking in the afterglow.

The people of the Silk Clan all considered her a tyrant. But she wasn’t *just* a tyrant. She was an extremely skilled tyrant.

First of all, she was extremely strong. While she herself was a nearly peerless

warrior, she was also an enormously gifted tactician, and because of her twisted personality, she was extraordinarily skilled at setting traps and schemes that caught her opponents by surprise. In the civil war and during the Tiger Clan invasion that had followed, she had easily overcome overwhelming odds, and now she had easily accomplished the conquest of the Tiger Clan.

To describe her using a single word, she was invincible. Completely overwhelming. That impression had been thoroughly ingrained in the minds of the Silk Clan's people. No one dared oppose her. They couldn't. Even criticizing her was out of the question.

Despite that, the clan didn't merely survive but *thrived*. In the last three years, she had liquidated everyone who had opposed her, but the result had been a massive decrease in corruption within the clan. Not only had the corrupt bureaucrats been slain, but the remaining bureaucrats also dared not engage in corruption out of fear of the consequences.

Furthermore, the fear that she inspired in her subjects had made the people of the Silk Clan dedicated and studious and had massively improved the peace and productivity of the clan. Her tantrums had made the clan's artisans desperate for her approval and had resulted in several major breakthroughs. She had simply acted according to her whims, but the result had brought prosperity to the clan.

Such was the reality of the unreasonable woman that was Utgarda, Prymr of the Silk Clan.

"We are in a very good mood. We shall provide the soldiers with a reward. We shall permit them to spend the next three days looting and pillaging Gastropnir. Let them have their fill."

Utgarda sat back magnanimously on the throne and issued the order to her subordinate. She basked in the sheer generosity she was bestowing upon her subjects as their ruler. Surely there were few rulers quite so generous.

"Heheh. Our next prey shall be the þjóðann, Suoh-Yuuto."

Utgarda smiled like a snake and licked her lips.

Considering the contents of the imperial edict, the conquest of the Tiger Clan

would invite retribution from the þjóðann.

Suoh-Yuuto was a man who had taken control of a minor clan in Bifröst and had quickly ascended through the ranks to finally become þjóðann of the whole of Yggdrasil in the blink of an eye. No doubt he was a strong man with the intense aura of a conqueror.

To bring down such a man, to force him to his knees in front of her and see his face crumple in despair... Why, just thinking about it sent a bolt of pleasure through Utgarda's body. She basked in the warmth of that sweet tingle, her expression one of utter fulfillment. She let slip a sigh of pleasure.

“We are looking forward to it immensely...”

Mímir. It was the city that had once been the capital of the Spear Clan. It was now serving as the frontline base for the Flame Clan's campaign against the Holy Capital. Having been the home city of Hárbarth, the High Priest and effective ruler of the Holy Ásgarðr Empire, it was a prosperous city that was among the five greatest in Yggdrasil.

In the palace that loomed in the center of Mímir, a black-haired, black-eyed man—an extremely rare sight in Yggdrasil—sat in thought as he lounged on the throne. The numerous scars carved into his body were a silent testament to the countless battles he had seen and survived in his lifetime. This man was none other than Oda Nobunaga.

He was a decorated hero of historical legend, the man who had started the effort to bring an end to the hundred years of civil war that was Japan's Warring States Period and who had supposedly fallen at the hands of a treacherous retainer when his goal of unifying the country was finally within reach. He was also the man who, after arriving in Yggdrasil through some twist of fate, had taken control of the Flame Clan, and had chosen to continue his quest to conquer the known world.

“So, what to do...”

“With all respect, Great Lord. Our current situation is hardly one we could describe as advantageous.”

“In...deed.”

Nobunaga nodded his agreement at the words of his Second, Ran.

While it was true that, when viewed solely from the results achieved on the battlefield, he had defeated the pursuing Steel Clan Army with his Flame Clan forces and had forced them into a desperate retreat, that had only been a tactical victory.

In the end, he hadn't been able to conquer the all-important Holy Capital, and worse, he had lost a key piece in his supply chain—his clan's capital, Blíkjanda-Böl—forcing him to retreat to Mímir. Anyone could see that it had ended in a strategic defeat for the Flame Clan.

“News of our retreat from the Holy Capital and the loss of Blíkjanda-Böl will spread quickly to the clans of Ásgarðr. The Steel Clan will likely proclaim it at the top of their lungs as well.”

“Yes. It's probably safe to say that the clans that had been watching to see which way the balance would shift will side with the Steel Clan.”

“Yes. In which case we'll be surrounded by the Steel Clan to the north, the Helm Clan to the west, and the Shield and Armor Clans to the east. We've also lost our key supply center—our clan capital—to the south. We are quite literally surrounded on all sides! Hah!”

Nobunaga laughed off the desperate situation that he found himself in. To him, this was nothing new. He had already experienced being surrounded by an alliance of his enemies twice before. In both cases, he'd crushed both encirclements. It wasn't a particularly big problem. In fact—

“I should be old enough to know better, but I find all this so very exciting.”

Nobunaga bared his fangs and emitted a fighting aura from his body. This aura was so intense that even Ran, who had served him for years and was used to his presence, found it intimidating.

“Our first objective is to retake Blíkjanda-Böl. Shiba!”

“M'lord?”

Upon hearing Nobunaga's thunderous summons, a man stepped forward

from the gathered generals. The man appeared to be in his mid-thirties, well-built, and bore a head of faded ashen hair.

Typically, even the greatest of warriors would tense anxiously in Nobunaga's presence, but this man appeared unaffected and had an air and aura completely different from the others.

His name was Shiba. He was a great man who was considered to be the most capable general in the great Flame Clan.

ACT 2

Fwooosh... Crash...

The waves repeatedly crashed against the rocks on the shore.

“Gaaaah! What’s taking Big Sis Al so long?!”

Hildegard chewed on her thumb, making her impatience clear.

She was perhaps fifteen years of age, with almond-shaped eyes that gave her a faintly arrogant air, as well as braided hair. While she looked much too slender to swing a sword, she was an Einherjar with the rune of Úlfhéðinn, the Wolfskin, and was a fully-fledged member of the Steel Clan’s elite Múspell Unit.

Indeed, she was an up-and-coming heroine. She had thoroughly shown her mettle in the year since she first joined the unit, and as a result, she had been promoted to become one of its commanders with a hundred soldiers under her wing.

“Don’t be so impatient. You have children of your own. Calm yourself.”

The woman who dryly cautioned her was a slim beauty who was just as slender and delicate as Hildegard. Her shimmering silver hair and captivating features made her look almost like a creature from myth. Her name was Sigrún. She was Hildegard’s sworn older sister and the bloodcurdling harsh taskmistress in command of the Múspell Unit.

“Well, um... Okay.”

Hildegard slumped her shoulders and sighed. Sigrún had repeatedly drilled into Hildegard that a warrior needed to be calm and collected at all times. Hildegard herself agreed with that sentiment, but she couldn’t help but voice her concern.

“Y-You say that, but surely she’s taking too long! She was supposed to be here yesterday, wasn’t she?”

Hildegard, Sigrún, and the rest of the Múspell Unit had abandoned the city of

Blíkjanda-Böl they had been occupying and had sheltered in the mountains close to the shore, waiting for the ships that would take them home. No matter how strong the elite members of the Múspell Unit might have been, there was no way they could hold the Flame Clan capital with only a thousand or so troops. The plan had always been to take what they could and escape before the main body of the Flame Clan Army returned.



“That’s just a rough timeline. Several days is well within the expected margin of error,” Sigrún answered coolly.

The *Galleon*-class sailing ship developed by the Steel Clan, the *Noah*, could certainly sail closer to the wind than any traditional ship on Yggdrasil, but she was still at the mercy of bad winds and tides. As one would expect, she sailed much faster with the wind than she did into it. It was a relatively long voyage, so it was easily within the realm of possibility that the prevailing winds could delay the *Noah* for a few days.

Still...

“How can you be so calm?! If the Flame Clan Army finds us before Big Sis Al gets here, we’re finished!” Hildegard fretted with the faintest touch of panic present in her voice.

Only the gods themselves knew which way the wind would blow. Hildegard couldn’t change anything by complaining. Worrying about the issue only served to stress her more than necessary, which would leave her emotionally exhausted. The problem was, however, that Hildegard was too young to be able to completely detach herself from the situation, emotionally speaking, and further, given her tendency to wet herself, she had a certain skittishness to her.

“Sniff... If I’d known this’d happen, I would’ve forced my way on board the last ship...”

Hildegard cradled her head and sank into a gloom. The very fact that she’d say such a thing in front of her direct superior showed just how cornered she felt.

“Don’t be ridiculous. No one would accept you receiving special treatment like that.”

Even Sigrún couldn’t help but let out a note of exasperation.

With the upcoming emigration to the new continent currently the main focus, the Steel Clan needed all the extra food that it could get its hands on. So for that reason, they had loaded the *Noah* twice with nothing but foodstuffs and had left their troops ashore in the meanwhile.

“I understand, but... but...”

“Gods. You need to build up some mental fortitude first. If you can’t keep your wits about you when it matters, then your talents will go to waste.”

“You say that, but...”

As she continued to listen to Hildegard’s wallowing, even Sigrún’s patience had finally reached its end. Her brow twitched.

“For the love of... You’re getting on my nerves. Come, I’ll give you a lesson! You’re dwelling on this because you’re bored!”

With that, Sigrún grabbed Hildegard by the scruff of the neck and dragged her off. They ended up spending a great deal of time training.

“Tch. We’re late!”

Although he had retaken the clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl, Shiba’s expression was tense.

Given that he had hurried back intending to punish the presumptuous wastrels that had attacked their clan capital, the all-important Steel Clan forces were nowhere to be found, and the city was devoid of any signs of an enemy whatsoever.

If that had been the end of it, he could have accepted it. He could have merely laughed it off as cowardice in the face of his pursuit. However, Shiba was utterly outraged when he learned they had pillaged the city’s stores for much of the freshly harvested winter wheat crop and had burned whatever remained that they couldn’t take with them.

“Gah! After them! We can’t let them get away with this!” Shiba howled, his face twisted in rage. His expression made even the most elite Flame Clan soldiers cower.

“Hold up, Big Bro.”

Shiba’s adjutant Masa hurriedly tried to stop him.

“What?!” Shiba said in a low tone, barely holding back his anger and glaring at his adjutant.

Meanwhile, the rank-and-file men of the Flame Clan Army whispered

amongst themselves about how Shiba's glare of rage was enough to frighten off even fearsome creatures like tigers and wolves...

"The soldiers are tired from the forced march. It's long past time you let them rest," Masa counseled, not showing even the faintest trace of hesitation.

It was said that, other than the patriarch, Nobunaga, the only one who could admonish Shiba was his childhood friend, Masa.

"Mm, you have a point."

It took about a month to get from Mímir to Blíkjanda-Böl on foot. The Second Division under Shiba's command had marched that distance in just ten days. An army's pace was set by the slowest unit in its ranks. That much was widely understood and accepted in war.

For that reason, Shiba had intentionally left the army's supply units behind—the units responsible for carrying supplies like foodstuffs—and had executed an unusual forced march with a group consisting solely of mounted cavalry. He was able to resupply by using the cities under the Flame Clan's control as resting stops, but even when taking that into account, a ten-day march had certainly pushed his men to their limits. The Flame Clan Army may have been professional—made up entirely of well-trained soldiers—but even they were still completely worn out after such a feat.

"Then..."

"We have no time to waste, though. If we let them escape, we'll find ourselves left in famine."

"Mm, that's..."

This time it was Masa who was caught without a response.

Of course, it had only been Blíkjanda-Böl that had suffered the looting, so if they gathered supplies from the rest of the clan's territories, the Flame Clan as a whole should be able to pull through the winter. However, the area around Blíkjanda-Böl was such an immensely productive agricultural center that it was known as the Flame Clan's breadbasket.

If nothing changed, they wouldn't have enough grain to keep everyone fed

and would need to commandeer additional supplies. If that were to happen, there would be a large number of people who would starve to death. Just thinking about it sent a shiver down Masa's spine.

"At the very least, we shall take back the grain they took! They supposedly left two days ago. Depending on the wind, we may very well be able to catch them!"

As though declaring the discussion over, Shiba leaped atop his favored mount and galloped out the city gate.

Sigrún and Hildegard were sparring with wooden swords like they had been the previous day. With nothing else to do until the ship returned, it was natural they'd settle on this choice. Since it was an exchange between Einherjar, the fighting itself—though merely practice—was fierce. It was enough to make the other members of the Múspell Unit stare in awe, forgetting their own training in the process. The sparring lasted for an exchange of fifty blows before finally —

"Yah!"

"Not good enough!"

As Hildegard let loose with a powerful slash, Sigrún avoided taking the blow head-on and instead parried the blow just enough to allow it to slide harmlessly off to the side. It was the Willow Technique that Skáviðr, the previous Mánagarmr and Sigrún's mentor, had wielded so skillfully.

"Whoa—?!"

As though dragged over by her own strength, Hildegard lost her footing, and she came tumbling forward. What had just unfolded was a show of the true power of the Willow Technique. It was best described as such: the use of the least possible movement to undermine an enemy's footing to delay their next attack.

"This isn't over!"

"Ah?!"

Sigrún's eyes went wide with surprise at Hildegard's unexpected counter. Usually, a person would reflexively try to retain their footing when their momentum carried them forward. In this situation, however, Hildegard chose to roll in with her momentum and sink to the ground. That snap decision quickly bore fruit. Sigrún's wooden blade cut through the air just a hair's breadth away from Hildegard, and it was now her turn to be dragged forward by her own momentum.

"Yaah!"

"Oof!"

Sigrún somehow managed to block the attack, but Hildegard had combined her already high physical abilities with her own momentum. Unable to hold her guard, Sigrún's blade was deflected upward.

"Got you!"

"Tch!"

Hildegard followed up with a sideways slash at Sigrún's flank. In response, Sigrún forced her deflected arms back into position and aimed her own slash at Hildegard's neck. As the troopers looked on with tense expressions of anticipation, Hildegard's blade stopped right before it impacted against Sigrún's body. Sigrún's blade, too, had stopped just before it hit Hildegard's neck.

"Ah!"

The two of them immediately turned their attention to Thír, the Maiden of the Wave member who had ended up serving as the judge.

"Draw!"

Thír swept both hands out horizontally from her body.

The cheers of the troopers flooded the surroundings as though a dam that had been holding their voices back had burst.

It was understandable. Sigrún, the woman who had defeated countless heroes from various clans and was the Steel Clan's greatest warrior in both truth and name, held the coveted title of Mánagarmr. Until this point, no one in the Múspell Unit had been able to "kill" her. Even if it had been a draw,

Hildegard was the first person to accomplish this feat.

“Damn! You finally broke down the Boss Lady’s defenses!”

“Well done, Hilda!”

“Wow, I wasn’t even involved and I got goosebumps! You’re damned impressive! Eh, hey, what’s up with that face?”

The troopers piled praises onto Hildegard in the wake of her immense feat, but Hildegard herself puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“Wh-What do you mean it’s a draw?! I was definitely faster! Are you blind?!” Hildegard protested aggressively to Thír, practically grabbing the woman to press home her point.

She certainly had guts to be able to voice complaints to the feared drill instructor that even the Maidens of the Waves feared. That wasn’t quite it, though. She was simply so angry that she didn’t understand what she was doing.

“You’re certainly right. You were faster by an eyeblink.”

Thír had a forced smile as she accepted Hildegard’s point.

“See?! In which case I...”

“But in combat, you would have both died.”

Hildegard pouted in displeasure. She had been faster. It seemed she couldn’t accept the ruling. At the same time, she was a seasoned warrior in her own way. She also understood that Thír made a valid point. No doubt everyone else would have made the same judgment as Thír.

“It’s fine. You can call it a win.”

The one who spoke up in support of Hildegard was, surprisingly, Sigrún herself.

Sigrún’s face still held no expression, and it was impossible to read just what she was feeling, but then...

“Well done, Hilda.”

Sigrún ruffled Hildegard’s hair. Hildegard felt emotions flood into her, and her

eyes began to sting. She couldn't hold back the flow of tears, and she soon began to weep.

"Mm? What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing! Nothing at all!"

Hildegard brusquely brushed off Sigrún's words of concern and wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. She had been caught totally off guard. Hildegard couldn't have imagined that the usually harsh Sigrún would offer her words of praise. It had come completely out of nowhere. But that was also why she found the words so intensely gratifying.

"Heh. I'm going to become even stronger. Your age is over, Mother Rún! It's my time now!"

Of course, Hildegard wasn't the sort to honestly state her feelings. In response, Sigrún simply nodded intently.

"Indeed. Your physical abilities are already superior to mine. If you keep working on your technique, that day might come sooner than we think."

"Not might. It's almost here!" Hildegard boasted as she proudly puffed out her chest. She had a bad habit of letting even the smallest amount of success go to her head.

Sigrún would ordinarily have admonished her, but instead, she simply went along with it.

"I'm looking forward to that."

Sigrún once again agreed with her. Hildegard suspected it was all a trick to get her to let down her guard, but she felt there was something more to it. Perhaps Sigrún really had accepted her growth as a warrior.

The hellish training that she'd been through over the last year replayed in Hildegard's mind. It was the hardest, most intense year of her life, but at that moment, she believed that it had all been worth it. Hildegard felt tears pooling in her eyes as the flood of emotion hit her. She looked over to the person she regarded as a mentor.

"I've finally got an opponent I can give my all."

“Huh?”

Hildegard could merely let out a squeak at Sigrún’s words. She thought for a moment that she’d misheard her.

“Hah, wait... You’re almost making it sound like you were holding back up until now. C’mon, Mother Rún, don’t go making excuses for losing, it’s not very cool!” Hildegard said as she put on a forced smile, hoping against hope that her words were true.

She thought she’d finally caught up to Sigrún; she didn’t want to imagine the possibility that there were further heights to climb. But deep down, she knew. She knew that her boss would never joke about such matters.

“You’ll understand once you’ve faced me.”

Sigrún once again took up a combat stance with her wooden sword, and Hildegard immediately noticed something was off. There was a quietness to Sigrún. Her bone-chilling killer intent was gone, as was her heart-crushing intimidation. If anything, it felt like Sigrún had gotten weaker.

“Ready your sword.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am.”

Though Hildegard had honestly been caught by surprise at the lack of tension, she hurriedly took up a stance of her own.

“Let’s begin.”

“Come at meep—?!”

An odd sound spilled from Hildegard’s lips. It was understandable—Sigrún had suddenly closed the distance.

The blow that she unleashed a moment after had been an ordinary downswing from the start, but Sigrún had clearly caught Hildegard unaware. She was still able to block the blow by taking advantage of the immense physical strength she possessed, but that was all she could manage.

However, she couldn’t even respond to the second blow that had been unleashed without her knowledge, and by the time she realized what had happened, Sigrún’s wooden sword was resting against her neck.

“Wait... What...?”

The fight had been over before it had really started, leaving Hildegard only able to let out a groan of protest. This exchange had made things very clear to her, though. Not only that, she had now been made painfully aware of a very important fact. Sigrún had been holding back against her up until now.

By putting her aggression behind each blow, Sigrún had made it easier for Hildegard to follow her attacks. Without Sigrún’s usual killing intent present to choreograph her incoming attacks, Hildegard had been a heartbeat slower in responding, and that split-second difference had made all the difference to the outcome.

“There’s still a whole lot to learn.”

“Yeah, definitely. I have lots to learn... Hrmph!”

“Oh, no, I was talking about myself.”

“Are you mocking me for not being able to do anything against you?”

“No, Brother Ská does a better job of erasing his presence,” said Sigrún, who was evidently displeased with her own technique and had started taking practice swings.

“Damned monsters.” Hildegard couldn’t help but quip under her breath.

During this campaign, Hildegard had sparred with the Maidens of the Waves, considered the most elite of the elite—she held a winning record against several of them, in fact—and had even been able to do pretty well against its top three members.

For someone as tough as Hildegard to have been so thoroughly infantilized, the strength of the Mánagarmr must have surely been utterly ridiculous.

“I’m offended. The only monster around is Brother Ská,” Sigrún said with a dry laugh.

“What are you talking about? You have the title of Mánagarmr because you’re stronger than the monster that is Lord Skáviðr, right?”

“...True.”

It took a moment for Sigrún to answer because she felt a momentary surge of guilt at the remark. It wasn't as though she had won the title Mánagarmr by defeating Skáviðr in battle, after all. He had abdicated it to her because he had decided that with her beauty and strength, Sigrún would be better able to inspire the troops.

Sigrún herself hadn't been particularly satisfied with the proposal, but because of the harsh situation that the Wolf Clan had found itself in, and also because of Yuuto's encouragement, Sigrún had been forced to accept the title.

Of course, Sigrún had no intention of simply being a symbolic Mánagarmr and had done her best to fill his shoes. She trained to actually become the strongest. She was also confident that she was much stronger than she had been when she first took the title, but the truth was that she could only defeat Skáviðr once out of every five times in sparring matches.

"Brother Ská is frightening for reasons other than sheer strength." Since it was a rather troublesome topic, Sigrún decided to change the subject.

"I've heard he's also a great general."

"Yes, he's a highly skilled general. His greatest strengths lie in his abilities as an instructor, though. Brother Ská developed almost all of the battle techniques that I've taught you, and alone, at that."

"Whaaat?! Really?!"

Hildegard stared in amazement.

Battle techniques in this case didn't mean tactics used on the battlefield, but rather referred to actual fighting techniques. Hildegard had been thoroughly impressed by the quality of the battle techniques Sigrún had taught her. The movements were fluid and efficient, smoothly flowing from one form to another, and the techniques as a whole were rational and practical. They were so effective that a new Einherjar like her had learned to fight skilled veteran Einherjar in a little under a year.

"Hrm. Once we get home, I might ask him for instruction."

"A good idea. He can be difficult to approach, but you'll learn much from him."

“Well, I’m used to dealing with people like that,” Hildegard said as she stared intently at Sigrún. As far as hard to approach went, well... Her mentor was much the same in that regard too.

“Hrmph. Well stated, I suppose. Fine. I’ll introduce you to Brother Ská when we get back.”

“That’s a promise!”

Hildegard made sure to drive home the point.

Her current goal was to beat Sigrún. If achieving that was still far out of her reach and there was such a wonderful instructor around, then she definitely wanted to be taught by him.

Of course, by this point, Skáviðr had already died at the Battle of Glaðsheimr, and since they were deep behind enemy lines, they had no way of knowing that this promise could never be fulfilled.

“...Huh?”

Suddenly hearing a very familiar sound, Hildegard turned to look behind her in surprise. It was one of the last sounds she wanted to hear.

“Mm? What is it?” Sigrún asked with concern.

It seemed that no one else, Sigrún included, could hear the sound. Because of her rune, Úlfhéðinn, Hildegard’s ears were particularly sensitive. The sound was still quite far away but was getting nearer by the moment.

It was the heavy footfall of a large force approaching at great speed!

“Tch. Much faster than I expected.” Sigrún clicked her tongue bitterly.

Hildegard may have had all sorts of flaws—such as her penchant for overconfidence, her lack of respect for elders, and her tendency to wet herself—but Sigrún truly trusted in Hildegard’s sense of smell and hearing.

She had chosen Hildegard to serve as one of her commanders in part due to her immense capability to detect incoming enemies. The faster a force can notice an impending emergency, the fewer losses they will sustain as a result of it. The ability to do that was far more important in battle than simply having

brute strength, something that could do nothing besides kill an enemy. Of course, it seemed like Hildegard herself had no understanding of that fact.

“My apologies, it seems I’ve misread the enemy,” Bömburr spat out regretfully as he bowed his head to her.

He was a short and faintly rotund man, and he looked substantially different from the other members of the Múspell Unit. Just as his appearance indicated, he wasn’t a particularly mighty warrior.

However, the true reason he served as the Múspell Unit’s Second was because he was an extremely capable administrative officer—one which nobody in the Unit could find themselves able to fault. He had handled the planning and scheduling for this operation’s transport and return dates, and it was clear he felt a great measure of responsibility for their predicament.

“No, it’s not only your fault. We also voiced no objection,” Thír, the leader of the Maidens of the Waves, said with a pained expression.

As she noted, Bömburr’s decision-making had been extremely rational. If anything, there were a few among them who had stated it had been too conservative, that it had placed too much emphasis on safety.

It had been exactly a month-and-a-half earlier that the Múspell Unit had assembled aboard the ships and set sail from the Steel Clan port. During that time, the main body of the Flame Clan Army was still laying siege to the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr.

In terms of geographic distance, even if the Flame Clan Army had immediately set off to take back their clan capital, it would only have left them with just enough time for them to arrive before the Múspell Unit left.

Of course, given that the conquest of the Holy Capital was a long-held desire of the Flame Clan patriarch, Oda Nobunaga, as well as the fact that he had gone to the trouble of building numerous siege castles to further improve his odds of success, it was unlikely he had pulled back his entire army.

Thinking about it rationally, the Flame Clan Army had only set out back to Blíkjanda-Böl after learning of the capital’s fall, and it should have taken them at least another ten days to arrive.

“Based on the sounds, there’s a few thousand of them. And it seems almost all of them are mounted.”

“Ah! Damnation! Stirrups!”

As she quickly parsed what Hildegard had told her, Sigrún clicked her tongue in realization.

Unlike the Panther Clan, the Flame Clan was an agricultural clan, so she had casually determined that their forces would consist primarily of infantry. The fact that the battles with the Lightning Clan had indeed been heavy on infantry had only served to harden that assumption. However, the patriarch of the Flame Clan came from the same land as Yuuto. It was only natural that he would know about stirrups.

“Several thousand cavalry, you say?”

Even the normally unflappable Sigrún couldn’t help but furrow her brow under the circumstances.

Though the Múspell Unit was the strongest force the Steel Clan Army had under its command, as well as having a large number of powerful Einherjar accompanying them in the form of the Maidens of the Waves, there was a large problem: They were all on foot. It would be very difficult for them to defeat an enemy several times their number, particularly when their forces were all on horseback.

“Spread out! Comb the grass if you must! Find them!”

Upon receiving Shiba’s orders, the cavalry scattered in every direction.

It wasn’t a particularly difficult matter to pursue a group of a thousand people. There had been plenty of witnesses who had spotted them, and even in places without any human presence, they would leave a mass of footprints and crushed flora in their wake. Shiba’s forces had used that information in their pursuit.

“They should be in this area,” Shiba said, half-trying to convince himself.

According to the people who inhabited the fishing villages nearby, enormous

ships that were veritable floating fortresses had sailed by several times. It had been around ten days since the fishermen had seen the ships, while the Steel Clan Army had abandoned Blíkjanda-Böl a mere three days ago. It was reasonable to surmise that they should still be ashore.

“Father! We’ve found them! They’re on the peninsula ahead!”

After waiting an hour with arms crossed, fingers digging into his biceps, Shiba had finally received the information he’d been waiting for, courtesy of his sworn children.

“That way, eh? Heh. An ideal spot indeed.”

Shiba bared his canines in a feral grin and immediately moved his forces to the entrance of the peninsula. It was a small peninsula that barely jutted out to the sea.

Surrounded by sea on three sides, it was trivial for Shiba to seal off any escape routes. The enemy was now the proverbial fish in a barrel.



“The enemy numbered perhaps a thousand, yes? Very well then. We shall split our forces in three. I’ll circle in from the right, and my Second’s force will attack from the left. Masa, you’re to wait here.”

Shiba efficiently issued orders to his subordinates.

The center of the peninsula was covered by a thick forest and would be difficult to enter on horseback, which was why Shiba first intended to approach from either shoreline and block the enemy in.

If they then decided to flee to the edge of the peninsula, he could catch them in a pincer movement, while if they tried to escape by cutting through the woods, Masa’s waiting forces could hold them in place to allow the other two units to complete the encirclement.

“Let’s move, men! Show them what awaits those that resist the Flame Clan!”

Shiba held his spear high up to the sky as he made his declaration, prompting a roaring cheer from the Flame Clan elites under his command. The thunderous cheer was enough to startle the seabirds, sending them scattering into the sky.

The Flame Clan men were all driven by a deep hatred for the enemy that had taken their clan capital and looted it of its foodstuffs. Their anger was at such a pitch that they wouldn’t be satisfied even if they rent their enemy limb from limb a hundred times over.

The Flame Clan forces marched stridently along the shoreline. However...

“Mmph?!”

They had been forced to suddenly stop dead in their tracks. The countless wooden barriers buried into the sand cut off their advance. They were simple barriers constructed out of branches and twine that only stood at about waist height. The rough-hewn and shoddily constructed fencing was low enough that they could simply be stepped over with their mounts.

“Urgh. What is it, Gunlocke?”

However, faced with the fences, his beloved horse refused to move. Spurring the horse, whipping the horse, none of it could make the horse do anything but shy away from the fencing.

Then, at that very moment, came a hail of arrows.

“Tch.”

While Shiba reflexively drew his sword to cut down the arrows in mid-flight, not all of his troopers were able to react in time.

“Guh!”

“Ah!”

Several of them couldn’t block the arrows and let out grunts of pain.

“Damn you!” Shiba spat bitterly as he glared angrily beyond the fencing.

The enemy forces were wielding bows, which wasn’t a problem in itself. The problem was the range from which they were firing.

“Those blasted bows. They were a thorn in our side at Glaðsheimr, and now they’re going to cause us trouble here too!”

While the Flame Clan’s bows had been improved by Nobunaga to the point that they vastly outperformed the bows of the other clans, the Steel Clan bows further outclassed their own. It was hugely frustrating to be getting hit from afar by the enemy without being able to respond. The wooden barriers the Múspell Unit had erected had completely blocked the Flame Clan force’s advance.

“Quite the enemy. I suppose this won’t be easy.”

Shiba immediately changed his appraisal of the enemy and steeled himself.

He had heard that the Steel Clan’s reginarch came from the same country as his own clan’s patriarch, Nobunaga. Shiba knew from personal experience just how overwhelming the various technologies that Nobunaga had brought about could be.

If he allowed his advantage in numbers to cloud his judgment, he could very well suffer a sucker punch. While Shiba’s reputation as an aggressive general emphasized his attacking ability, he wasn’t a bear of a man who only understood how to charge forward in battle. The true reason he was known as a great general was his quick and accurate decision-making in the midst of battle.

“I came up with that on the spot, but it seems it worked.”

Sigrún let out a deep sigh of relief. She had led a cavalry unit for over three years. She knew the habits of horses better than anyone. Horses were animals that were best suited to running along level ground, but they tended to want to avoid jumping over obstacles. Even for fences that they could easily clear with a leap, without training, they'd shy away from trying.

Their legs were everything to the horses. If they weren't able to run properly, then they'd become easy prey for predators. If a horse were to injure their legs by leaping over an obstacle, the only thing that awaited them was death. It was understandable that they would avoid doing anything to harm their legs.

“Your reputation is well-earned, Mánagarmr. Such a brilliant innovation.”

“Not at all. This was merely a copy of one of Father's tactics. Besides, it was something we were able to do thanks to your presence.”

At Thír's praise, Sigrún replied with modesty and a compliment in turn.

Fortunately, the beach was narrow, and there was plenty of material to use in the woods nearby. It didn't take much time to seal off the beaches when a thousand people worked efficiently and in unison. Even with that in mind, though, they had barely been able to get the fencing done in time, and the only reason they were able to do so was because they also had a large number of Einherjar with powerful physical abilities.

“In particular, we would have been in trouble without Lady Hrönn.”

While she was the youngest and smallest member of the Maidens of the Waves, the ásmegin from Hrönn's rune was all focused on enhancing her physical strength, making her one of the strongest of those present.

It was truly overwhelming to watch her use a war ax taller than her own body to bring down trees in the woods, and those watching shivered, wondering if she surpassed even Steinþórr, the Dólgprasir. It was a terrifying show of strength.

“But, I don't know how long it'll last.”

When it came to it, they were little more than a hurriedly put-together set of obstacles. They weren't tough enough to stand up to any concerted efforts to remove them. A strong group of men wouldn't have much trouble destroying them.

They were currently using volleys of arrows to keep the Flame Clan soldiers from approaching the fences, but their supply of arrows was finite.

"It would be best if the ships would arrive while they're dawdling by the fences, but..."

"...It doesn't look like that'll work."

"So it would seem."

Sigrún agreed with Thír's observation and let out a sigh. It was hard not to. After all, the enemy had started climbing over the wooden fences and was pushing forward.

"Tch. They were quick to abandon their horses."

Sigrún couldn't help but click her tongue in annoyance.

The wooden fences were only tall enough to reach a man's waist. To phrase it differently, they were low enough for grown men to easily climb over them. All they needed to do was dismount and close the remaining distance by foot.

"It's the right answer, but I wish they'd have taken more time to reach it."

Sigrún had wanted to make the fences a little taller, but the height was something they had to compromise on to get them completed on time.

Once the enemy realized that they could simply climb over the fences and close the ground between the two forces on foot, it was a simple enough call, but had she been in the same position, Sigrún would probably have struggled with the decision.

To a cavalry trooper, their mount was a beloved companion. They understood that their strength came from their ability to ride. They had also undergone the harsh training necessary to ride in battle. Above all, they had their pride as cavalry troopers.

To take the step of abandoning their horses, under those circumstances,

wasn't a simple matter. It was natural for any cavalry trooper to try to figure out how to get across with their mounts.

Sigrún's true goal had been to buy time for the ships to arrive as the cavalry troopers struggled with that decision, but it seemed things wouldn't go that conveniently for her.

"Quite the enemy. I suppose this won't be easy."

Sigrún steeled herself with the realization that she was facing a powerful enemy. The words she murmured were, coincidentally, the same as those uttered by her opponent Shiba.

"Advance! Advance! Advaaaaaance!" Shiba roared as he dashed through the hail of arrows that rained down upon him. He occasionally lost his footing in the sand, but he forged ahead. He had found the hated enemy that he'd been seeking. He was getting closer, step by step.

"Fire, fire, fire!"

A beautiful silver-haired woman who appeared to have stepped right out of myth stood shouting orders. Shiba blinked at the sight of the woman, who seemed completely out of place on the battlefield. He had heard the rumors, but he hadn't imagined she'd be *this* beautiful.

"So that's the Mánagarmr!"

In sharp contrast to her slender, delicate form, she was a powerful fighter who had defeated all manner of great warriors—Yngvi of the Hoof Clan, Váli of the Panther Clan, and Sígismund of the Fang Clan. Her calm demeanor under pressure, a loud, confident voice, and the lack of any openings to exploit even from this distance—all of these things spoke to how skilled she was.

Shiba was a man who had dedicated his life to battle. He had longed for an opportunity to face her.

"No shortage of worthy opponents! To arms!"

Shiba pointed his trusty spear at the enemy formation as he yelled, prompting his soldiers to charge toward the enemy. The two forces clashed, prompting

cheers and screams from the horde of men, and the air rang with the sound of metal and wooden hafts colliding.

The Steel Clan managed to win the initial exchange and secured an advantage.

“Gah! Long pikes, eh?!”

Shiba spat out the words with a sour look.

The “long pikes” he referred to were the incredibly long spears—usually over four times the height of the average man—that the Flame Clan had adopted for its armies, courtesy of Nobunaga. While they were too large and unwieldy to be useful in single combat, they made for a very dangerous weapon that allowed a unit to attack their enemies from a long distance with a veritable wall of spear-points. It was the primary weapon of the Flame Clan’s infantry, and Shiba himself knew just how effective they were.

“Quite a pain to be on the receiving end of them.”

The fact that he had chosen to march here with a force made up only of cavalry in an effort to arrive as quickly as possible had come back to haunt him. Pikes were far too long and heavy to use on horseback, after all. Though the Steel Clan’s Múspell Unit was also normally a mounted force, they must have decided to leave their horses behind and instead come equipped with pikes as this recent mission had been an amphibious assault. Because of that, the enemy remained out of reach even as their spears found their mark. If things continued this way, it would be a one-sided slaughter.

“Curse them! Where’s the Second?!”

He referred to the other force he had sent along the left-hand shore. Pike units were extremely vulnerable to attacks against their flanks and rear. Shiba was well aware of that fact thanks to his experience leading pikemen. If the Second’s unit could attack from the rear, it would mean that the enemy line would fall into confusion and quickly collapse.

He waited and waited, but there was no sign of them whatsoever.

“Tch. It seems safest to assume they’ve also been delayed.”

With a click of his tongue, Shiba began to plot his next move. While his forces were holding steady for the moment thanks to having a sizable numerical advantage—twice the men, to be exact—combined with high morale and their impressive discipline as professional soldiers, it was easy enough to see that if he continued to dally, the enemy would eventually force his lines. He needed to take appropriate measures as quickly as possible.

“Ah, right. We have those.”

Shiba recalled something he’d brought with him and smiled. It was a weapon that, if used correctly, could turn the tide of this battle in his favor. However, it was rather impractical to use on the battlefield for various reasons and was only really useful as a long-range intimidation tool.

“Mother Rún! The enemy’s pulling back!”

“So it seems.”

Sigrún’s expression lacked any of Hildegard’s giddiness, instead she let out a sigh of relief.

They were hemmed in by the sea in three directions and had nowhere to go. Further, their current location was the boarding point for their ship ride home, so leaving the peninsula wasn’t an option. If they couldn’t repel the enemy force here, the only thing that awaited them was destruction.

“Don’t get complacent. Tighten your helm straps when you’re winning.”

Many people tended to let their guard down when they were sure of their victory. The admonishment Sigrún had just given Hildegard was advice that she had herself received from Yuuto long ago. It was a quote that came from the land beyond the heavens, and he had shared it with her to prevent her from making a fatal mistake in the future. She had first-hand experience with the lessons it was meant to teach. After all, she had lost to Yuuto, a total amateur, in a sparring match back when he’d first arrived in Yggdrasil. Ever since then, she’d constantly kept it in mind and repeated the words to herself.

“Right then, men! Drive them back with everything you have!”

She immediately rededicated herself to the task at hand and issued an

enthusiastic order to her troops. The members of the Múspell Unit let out a spirited roar and began charging forward. They quickly pushed the enemy forces back to the wooden fences. However, their enemy was still a tough opponent. An ordinary unit may have had soldiers that would trip on the fences as they were pushed back to them, causing confusion, but the Flame Clan men calmly stepped over them and retreated without delay.

“About as expected. Men, halt! Don’t pursue them. Driving them off is all we need to accomplish.”

At Sigrún’s order, the Múspell Unit immediately stopped in place. It was quite a task to stop an aggressively pursuing army, but this was, after all, the most elite unit in the Steel Clan Army.

“Whaaat?! Shouldn’t we just thoroughly beat them down here? I bet they’ll come back again!”

It went almost without saying that the only one who complained was Hildegard.

“That’s fine. The danger is in moving into open ground,” Sigrún replied calmly, casually dismissing Hildegard’s objection. Sigrún showed no signs of elation at their recent victory. She displayed a firm grasp of the situation that was unfolding before her.

The reason they were able to win was solely due to the terrain. The peninsula was almost entirely covered with woodlands, and the only real paths into it were the narrow strips of beach along the shoreline. That made it the perfect location to use the wooden fences to block cavalry from approaching, as well as for pike square tactics.

But, if they let the victory go to their heads and pursued the enemy into open territory, the enemy would use that opportunity to take advantage of the greater numbers and mobility offered by their horses.

If that happened, then the Múspell Unit stood no chance of winning. The smart choice here was to stop the pursuit at the appropriate juncture.

“Right. Send men to reinforce Bömburr... What?!”

As she was about to order her forces to turn around, Sigrún furrowed her

brow. The Flame Clan Army that had supposedly broken into a retreat was returning for another attempt and was using a new formation, no less.

“The Arrowhead Formation! They’re trying to use brute force to break through.”

It was an extremely attack-focused formation that the late Steinþórr had used to frightening effectiveness. Yuuto had described the formation as such, so she had remembered the name.

At the time, Yuuto had countered it with the Yoke Formation, but it didn’t seem like she’d have the time to reorganize her forces. Sigrún had judged that this wasn’t a major issue, though. After all, Steinþórr was the only one who had ever broken a Steel Clan pike phalanx by attacking it from the front. That wasn’t so much because of the capabilities of the Arrowhead Formation in particular. Rather, it was due in large part to the monstrous physical abilities that Steinþórr possessed thanks to his twin runes.

It was also worth remembering that the Flame Clan was also a great clan. No doubt they had a large number of Einherjar in their ranks, though surely they didn’t have any monsters equal to the Dólgþrasir hiding among them. In that case, she figured her force should manage to stand its ground.

“All troops, on your guard! We’ll...”

CRACK!

A sharp, concussive blast rang out like thunder, drowning out Sigrún’s orders.

“Gah!”

One of the Múspell Unit troopers fell with an agonizing cry. Even Sigrún couldn’t grasp what had happened at that moment. They were still a good distance away from the enemy, which meant that it had to have been a projectile weapon of some sort. Additionally, taking into account the fact that an elite trooper of the Múspell Unit went down without being able to do anything about it meant that the attack had come from something extremely fast and nearly impossible to dodge.

“Ah. So *that* is an arquebus,” Sigrún murmured with a shudder.

She had spied one of the soldiers at the front line of the Flame Clan forces holding a long, black, tube-like object. She had heard the details of the weapon from Yuuto previously, but after seeing it in action, she realized it was a much more dangerous weapon than she had first imagined. Sigrún finally understood how the Flame Clan had slain Steinþórr, the Dólgprásir.

“But one isn’t enough to turn the tide of battle—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Sigrún’s eyes went wide with shock. The soldier at the front received another gun from behind and took aim again. It was the same tactic that Yuuto had used to allow for the rapid firing of his crossbows.

CRACK!

“Guh!”

With a second thunderclap, another of her soldiers clutched at his right shoulder and fell to his knees. Since the bullet hadn’t struck anything vital, the man’s life was not in danger, but in his pain, he dropped his weapon.

CRACK!

“Grmph!”

A third shot came, and another soldier was hit in the leg and collapsed. Then came the fourth and fifth shots...

“Guh!”

“Ahh!”

With each shot that rang out, an elite trooper of the Múspell Unit went down.

Phalanxes usually operated under the assumption that when a soldier fell, the one behind him would step up to fill that gap. But the rapid-fire attack that was being focused on a single point in the phalanx guaranteed that the ranks couldn’t keep up with the losses. The gunfire had opened a hole in the ordinarily unbreachable shield of the phalanx.

“Raaaaaaaah!”

Into that hole leaped a giant of a man who then swung his spear in a large

sweeping motion. Caught by the haft of his spear, several members of the Múspell front line were effortlessly knocked back. The man followed up with another swing. Again, more soldiers were swept aside.

As mentioned, pikes were vulnerable to attacks coming from directions other than the front. The sheer length made it impossible to maneuver the weapon effectively. Now that the enemy was too close for effective combat, the pikemen were essentially being flanked from within their own phalanx. Still, even setting that aside, the fact that a single man was sending groups of men to the ground at a time was definitely worthy of note.

“An Einherjar! A powerful one at that!”

As the worst-case scenario played out in front of her, even Sigrún’s brow beaded with sweat. The small gap in the phalanx that had been opened up by the gunfire was being yanked wider and wider by the attacking spearman. As more Flame Clan soldiers followed in his wake, the opening grew ever larger.

“All troopers, discard spears and draw swords!”

As it stood, their pikes were nothing more than a hindrance.

Amid such a dire situation, Sigrún made a display of her gravitas—something unusual for someone of such a young age. She needed to show that she could make a calm and collected decision using the skills she had honed through countless hard experiences and against grim odds. However, even she couldn’t deny that she was simply responding to the events as they were unfolding—the enemy had now seized the initiative. The battle quickly devolved into a chaotic melee as the two front lines melded together. The Steel Clan was now being pushed back.

The greatest reason for this...

“Hah! How utterly underwhelming! This is almost like a stroll in the woods!”

...was the Flame Clan Einherjar who was leading the charge.

She had viewed him as an extremely skilled warrior when she got her first glance at him, but Sigrún now had to upwardly revise her estimation of his abilities. He showed no sign of struggling against the grizzled veterans of the Múspell Unit. The presence of that single Einherjar was breaking down the Steel

Clan's front line.

"Pull back, all of you! I'll deal with him!"

Sigrún drew her katana from her hip and strode in front of the man. She had done so after determining that the Steel Clan couldn't win this battle if she didn't take him down immediately.

"Well, well... There you are, O mighty Mánagarmr! Heh. Men, stay back! I'll take her," the man declared to his soldiers, his lips twisted into a ferocious grin. He must have been extremely confident in his own skill. That confidence wasn't mere vanity either.

"Your fighting ability... Surely you're a man of repute. Name yourself."

"Very well. I am Shiba, Second Division Commander of the Flame Clan!"

"Ah, so you're Shiba the Berserker General."

Sigrún gazed intently at her opponent. Yuuto had considered the Flame Clan the greatest threat to his plans and had assigned Kristina with the task of tirelessly gathering intelligence on them.

Shiba the Berserker General... Sigrún had been briefed about him. He had been described as one of the most dangerous generals in Nobunaga's ranks. He was the greatest warrior of the Flame Clan—a man who had defeated countless Einherjar he had faced off against.

"Perfect. With your defeat, this battle will be ours, then."

Sigrún's gaze hardened. The perfect target had waltzed right into her lap. This would also serve as a golden opportunity to turn the tide of this battle.

"That's my line. Now, let us fight!"

The man drew back his spear and swung it downward at Sigrún. His arms were strong enough to knock away several large men at once. The strength and speed behind his swing were extraordinary, but—

"Yah!"

"Mmph?!"

The slash Sigrún unleashed with all her strength and skill sliced right through

Shiba's spear, severing the tip from the shaft. It happened in the blink of an eye.

Sigrún's beloved sword was one of a handful of masterpieces crafted by Ingrid, the famed master blacksmith of the Steel Clan—an artisan reputed to be one of the greatest in all of Yggdrasil. The combination of the blade's keen edge and Sigrún's skill made the feat look easy.

"Hmph!"

Sigrún turned the blade of her sword with a twist of her wrists and slashed diagonally down at Shiba's neck.

Even that one spear blow had served as a demonstration of Shiba's sheer skill as a warrior, and there was a part of Sigrún that wanted to fight him on equal terms, but this was a battlefield, and Sigrún was responsible for the lives of her thousand children. There was no room for sentiment or chivalry. Based upon the damage this man had wreaked against her men and the impact it would have on morale, she needed to kill him as quickly as possible.

Clang!

"Wha?!"

Having had her killing blow easily deflected, Sigrún's eyes went wide in shock. What truly shocked Sigrún, however, wasn't the fact that Shiba had blocked her blow, but rather, it was the weapon he held in his hand. It was a single-edged blade that was rarely seen in Yggdrasil. The blade itself had a distinct wave pattern she'd only ever seen on a single type of weapon.

"A nihontou..."

"That it is! Gifted to me from the Great Lord himself!"

Shiba grinned confidently as he took up his combat stance, katana in hand.

Yes, the blade he wielded was the very same gift that Yuuto had given to the Flame Clan when he proposed an alliance to contain the Lightning Clan, and like Sigrún's blade, was one of the masterpieces crafted by Ingrid.

Sigrún and Shiba's battle had escalated into an intense duel. They had exchanged over fifty blows, and neither showed a trace of fatigue. If anything,

the speed and strength of their blows had intensified with each passing moment. Both had told their children to stay out of the fighting, but even if they hadn't, no one could have interrupted the lethal dance of blades. That was just how much more powerful the two were compared to the others present. It was a display worthy of the mightiest warriors of the great Flame and Steel Clans. However, it wasn't an even match. If anything, it was a one-sided affair.

“Guh!”

Sigrún's expression was tense. She found herself at a disadvantage. Shiba had a slight but noticeable advantage over Sigrún in both strength and speed. At their level, even the slightest difference in ability made a substantial impact on the outcome. Of course, were that the only gap, Sigrún would have had ways to overcome it. Sigrún was used to fighting opponents with superior physical abilities, after all.

In terms of straightforward physical ability, Shiba was perhaps equal to Hildegard, Sigrún's daily sparring partner. Compared to the monster that had been Steinþórr, however, Shiba was a fair bit weaker.

There was an issue, though...

“Yah!”

“Tch!”

As their tense battle continued, Sigrún found that the strength she had put behind her counterattacks was being swept aside with ease by Shiba. This was the Willow Technique—a fighting technique that Sigrún knew as well as her own reflection.

She made an effort to shift her center of mass to avoid losing her footing, but Shiba simply followed up with a series of attacks of his own, and Sigrún was forced back on the defensive. In contrast to the brute force appearance of his blows, the attacks were efficient and calculated, flowing from one attack to the next without hesitation. That wasn't all, though. It appeared he had thoroughly practiced his forms. It was difficult to read where his attacks started.

This technique—The Shrinking Land—was also something Sigrún had seen before. Both it and the Willow were techniques that Sigrún's master Skáviðr

had developed. Of course, there was no connection between the two men. No, Shiba had developed the techniques all on his own.

Someone who combines both Hildegard's physical abilities and the battle techniques of Brother Ská... I can't believe that such a man exists in Yggdrasil...

Internally, Sigrún was shocked to the core. To borrow her Father's—Yuuto's—words, he had cheat abilities.

I can't beat him... Gah!

Even Sigrún had to accept the sheer difference in skill. However, she wasn't one to simply accept defeat. Sigrún still had an ace up her sleeve. Something she hadn't been taught by Skáviðr, but rather, a technique that she had developed on her own.

"Hrmph!"

"Oof!"

Unable to withstand the heavy blow loosed by Shiba, Sigrún briefly lost her footing. He wasn't going to miss that opportunity, nor would he pull back to set up for an excessively strong blow to hurry and finish her. Instead, another blow, like the ones before them, devoid of any waste or inefficiency, struck out at Sigrún.

"Ah!"

The moment she came face to face with her death, the color drained from her vision. Shiba's quick blow immediately started to slow to a crawl. Of course, it wasn't that Shiba's movements had slowed. Rather, Sigrún's subjective sense of time had accelerated. Shiba, the soldiers around them, and even her own body had all but frozen in place. It was close to the experience those facing death had of their lives flashing before them. Sigrún called this state the Realm of Godspeed.

It wasn't something she could use at will, but it was a forbidden realm that she could step foot into when she was staring death square in the face and her concentration was at its extreme limit.

The air around her was heavy, and she felt as though she were wading

through water. Sigrún stepped half a step back and drew her body back in turn. A sharp silver flash immediately passed by her eyes, and she felt a faint sting of pain against her neck. It was just a flesh wound. Nothing to worry about. In fact, she had actually let him nick her after reading his attack. It was to minimize her own movements and quickly move to her next attack.

“Hyah!”

She slashed her beloved blade downward in a diagonal motion as she stepped in. To Sigrún, it happened so slowly that she felt a certain impatience watching her attack unfold, but it was a strike that was, in fact, much faster than anything she had unleashed up until that point.

“Mmmph?!”

Shiba’s eyes focused on her as he blocked the blow. His reaction was understandable. Given that this recent blow was several levels faster and heavier than anything that had come before it, he was well within his rights to be puzzled.

These were the effects of being in the Realm of Godspeed—an adrenaline-fueled strength that came from being in an utterly dire situation.

“Yaaaaaaaah!”

Sigrún stacked follow-up blow after follow-up blow to take advantage of her opening.

“Nrrrrmph!”

It was now Shiba’s turn to be forced entirely on the defensive. There was simply far too great a difference in speed. The fact that he was able to respond to the rapid change in speed and weight of Sigrún’s blows spoke to his immense skill as a warrior. Even then, each blow brought him closer and closer to defeat.

However, Sigrún had a very small margin for error even with the advantage the Realm of Godspeed gave her—it was far too draining. She couldn’t sustain it for long. If anything, she needed to finish the fight right here, or she’d tire herself out completely.

“Yah!”

After ten or so blows, Sigrún's powerful blow deflected Shiba's blade upward and opened him up to an attack.

"Got you!"

Aiming at his heart, she loosed a sideways killing blow at his torso. Even in Sigrún's long history of battle, it was one of the three greatest strikes she had ever executed. Blood sprayed from Shiba's chest, but Sigrún knew at that moment that she'd missed, as her hands had felt no sensation of cleaving through flesh.

"Hrmph!"

"Wha?!"

Despite taking a light wound to his chest, Shiba stepped forward and loosed his blade in a downward slash. This attack wasn't one born of desperation, either. In fact, the blow was substantially stronger and swifter than any he had unleashed before. Even Sigrún, within the Realm of Godspeed, could only consider it dumb luck that she was able to avoid it.

"N-No, it can't be...!"

Sigrún imagined the worst. She couldn't believe it. She didn't *want* to believe it.

The reality was that the atmosphere of their duel had completely changed. It was far sharper—far tenser. Sigrún felt her blood run cold, while Shiba straightened and chuckled with amusement.

"Heh, such fun. Such fun, isn't it, Máragarmr?! I was starting to believe that no one in this land could step into my realm!" He remarked, before continuing. "Hah! Good, good! This excitement! This tension! It's been so long, I'd almost forgotten what it felt like!"

Shiba's lips quickly shifted into a joyous smile as he struck out with his blade. His strikes were so fast and precise that his previous attacks seemed more akin to the work of a novice swordsman.

This kind of assault was something Sigrún herself understood very well. When she was in the Realm of Godspeed, she could make minute corrections to her

actions and improve the precision of her technique. The initiative flipped once again, and Sigrún found herself entirely on the defensive.

Ridiculous! I can't believe this! This man... He's Steinþórr's equal!

Sigrún couldn't hide her shock in the face of the storm of relentless, fast, precise, and skilled blows that Shiba rained down upon her. Shiba's physical abilities mirrored those of Hildegard when she had unleashed her Beast, while his mastery of numerous battle techniques was so overwhelming that it left even Skáviðr's skills in the dust.

Of course, Shiba had also tapped into his last reserves of stamina and was forcing his body past its natural limits, so it wouldn't last long. It was the complete opposite of Steinþórr's strength, which had come from his inborn talent and almost feral instinct for fighting. Shiba's strength was something he had gained by developing and improving his technique to the very limits of what practice could achieve.

Clang!

"Guh!"

Unable to fully block his attacks, Sigrún was forced back several steps. Her legs were beginning to give out on her, and her head had begun to ache.

"Huff... Huff... Huff... Ugh, at this rate..."

Sigrún's breath came in labored gasps as panic welled up within her. She knew that she was reaching her limit in the Realm of Godspeed.

"Mm? What's wrong? Finished already?"

Meanwhile, Shiba still seemed to have plenty left in reserve.

It seemed that, unlike Sigrún, Shiba was able to enter and exit the Realm of Godspeed at will. That allowed him to reduce the amount of physical strain on his body while also changing up the rhythm of his attacks. Sigrún couldn't help but recognize that the technique she'd considered her ultimate ace up her sleeve was merely the foundations of a skill that could be developed so much further. Shiba had clearly developed and elevated his techniques beyond where she presently was.

“Huff, gasp, huff... Mm? That’s... I see. Then this is the only thing left for me to do.”

Sigrún caught something on the edge of her vision and nodded, sliding her sword back into her scabbard.

“Mm? Have you given up? How sporting. Very well. I myself wouldn’t want to kill a warrior of your skill.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. I have no intention of abandoning this fight.”

Sigrún lightly placed her hand against the hilt of her sword and faintly twisted her hip, shifting herself into a very particular stance. It was an lai stance. This was the very same technique that she’d used to defeat the legendary beast of the Himinbjörg Mountains, the garmr that was the mother of her beloved wolf Hildólfr.

Sigrún’s strength was nearly tapped. She was prepared to gamble everything on this blow.

“Heh, fascinating. Then let us do this!”

Shiba readied his sword in a high stance in response. As the powerful clashes of swords echoed around them, it seemed as though time had stopped for the pair. Contrary to appearances, though, they weren’t completely still. Shiba inched forward, shuffling his feet against the sand. If Sigrún let her guard down for even an instant, there was no doubt that he would take that opening to cut her down with a lightning-fast blow. The air around them may have been quiet, but with both fighters watching every move their opponent made, there was a palpable tension that steadily depleted the mental reserves of each duelist.

“Here, now.”

Shiba’s brow was beaded with sweat from the tension as his face broke into a grin. Sigrún needed no explanation to understand his words. The big toe of Shiba’s right foot was just within range of a lunging slash from Sigrún. This left Shiba just barely out of range for Sigrún’s attack to reach him.

“Your reputation is well-earned, Mánagarmr. It was a fun fight. Thinking about how it will end now fills me with a tinge of regret.”

They were both words of praise and words of parting. Having read the range of her strike, no doubt he knew that he had won. However, that was true of Sigrún too.

“I feel the same. I will admit, you’re stronger than I am. But I’m the one who has won.”

“What?”

It happened in the instant that Shiba furrowed his brow in suspicion. With a loud bass that echoed through to the very soul, an immense impact shook the ground.

“Mmph?!”

Even Shiba was distracted by the sudden event. It was a moment no longer than the blink of an eye, but Sigrún wasn’t one to miss such an opening.

“Yaaah!”

“Damm...it?!”

Sigrún’s sword flew out of the scabbard like a flash of lightning and—

Shiba hurriedly leaped backward. The Flame Clan emblem that had been sliced off fluttered to the ground. It was the emblem that had adorned Shiba’s torso.

“You actually avoided that... Damned monster.”

With her sword held in her follow-through, Sigrún let out an exasperated sigh. She had achieved her desired goal, though. All she needed to do was force her opponent to back away a good distance.

“Múspells! We are withdrawing! All of you, make a run for the loading dock!”

With that shout, Sigrún turned on her heel and began to run. As though in parallel to her sprint, the sails of the three giant ships that Sigrún and the Múspells had waited for with such longing glittered imposingly in the distance. She had resorted to using an iai strike because she had noticed those reinforcements.

“lai means not cutting down others and not being cut down by others;
Know that not having to act is victory.
lai means not cutting down others and not being cut down by others;
Victory by killing another means you have lost.”

As the teachings on lai indicated, lai itself was a defensive technique that considered winning without fighting to be the greatest accomplishment. It was a tactic that allowed Sigrún to kill two birds with one stone, forcing her opponent to retreat with a powerful and potentially lethal blow while leaving enough energy for her to make a run for the ships. Still, it was also true that the fact she had to resort to such trickery because she stood no chance against Shiba otherwise was the greatest humiliation that the Mánagarmr could face.

“Once I get home, I need to restart my training from square one.”

With a determination to win next time burning in her breast, Sigrún kept running at full speed toward the ships.

“Blast it! Chase them! Chaaase them!”

Shiba exhorted his soldiers with a tone of irritation.

He had been so close to victory. He wouldn’t be able to face Nobunaga if he let them slip through his grasp. Even if it was unavoidable that he’d let some of them slip through, he still intended to do as much damage as he could.

But—

A sharp whistle cut through the air before...

BOOOOOOOOM!

A giant boulder hurled from the deck of one of the ships landed on the beach, kicking up a sandstorm.

“Ugh. They’re launching those things from that far away?!”

It seemed an impossible feat for mere humans, and even Shiba had to suck in a breath at the sheer size of the boulders hurtling toward him. He wasn’t aware

of it, but it was a bombardment using trebuchets. Even the Flame Clan Army had to flee in the face of such firepower. As a result, their formation fell into disarray to avoid the rain of boulders, and their pursuit lagged behind.

And at that very moment...

“Gah!”

“Oomph!”

A staccato of explosions rang out from the ships, and blood spurted from the backs of the pursuing Flame Clan soldiers, dropping them in mid-stride.

“Tanegashimas?! Tch. I suppose, given that Suoh-Yuuto hails from the same country as the Great Lord, that it’s not particularly surprising they’d have them,” Shiba spat out bitterly.

Even in his Godspeed state, Shiba wasn’t certain he could avoid bullets from the arquebuses. Of course, he was operating under a misunderstanding. All of the firearms fired from the deck of the ships were arquebuses manufactured by the Flame Clan. When Sigrún and the Múspells had taken Blíkjanda-Böl, they had looted all of the arquebuses from the city and kidnapped all of the gunsmiths. It was an important mission that Yuuto had prioritized even over the capture of the city’s grain stores.

As the Flame Clan forces were caught flat-footed by the covering fire from the ships, the gap between them and the Steel Clan forces widened.

“Grr... Stay strong! Advance!”

Still, Shiba urged on his men and continued his pursuit. Even if there was some distance between the two forces, there were still a thousand fleeing Múspells. It would take a great deal of time for them to board the ships, or so he had thought, but—

“Wh-What a beast of a boat...”

Once he closed the distance, he blinked at the sheer size of the ship before him. It was practically a floating fortress.

“Tch, what are we meant to do against *that*?!” Shiba angrily retorted.

To take down a fortress with brute force usually required five to ten times the

enemy's forces. However, because they had rushed back to Blíkjanda-Böl with the weapons they had on hand, Shiba's forces had no siege weapons to speak of. Further, because the ships were floating on the water, the only feasible option to attack the Steel Clan was the jetty they were using to board the ship. The problem, however, was that the path to that jetty was narrow, and the gunfire from the ships made it impossible to approach.

During lulls in the gunfire, the Steel Clan soldiers who had already boarded the ships began to join in with arrow fire. They were probably the forces that had been fighting the Second's unit. It would seem that the Second had let them slip completely from his grasp.

"As much as I want to dismiss his efforts as pathetic... I'm in no position to criticize anyone else."

Shiba let out a long sigh. Even he was at a loss as to how to proceed. A reckless attack would simply mean more losses for his troops, and it was too much to ask for a surprise tactic that could figuratively reverse the tide. As he sat there idle, the Steel Clan had finished boarding the ships and had set off from the jetty. He had no way to follow them. Even though the enemy was so close, all he could do was watch them leave. There was no experience that could be more frustrating.

"Damn it all!"

He slammed his fist angrily into the sand. With a look of sheer rage, Shiba glared at the ships as they disappeared into the horizon.

"I'll remember this, Mánagarmr! I'll repay you for this humiliation!"

ACT 3

“Rún! I’m... I’m so glad you’ve come back safely!”

Yuuto had a quaver in his voice as he embraced Sigrún upon her safe return to the Holy Capital. He was so happy at the news that he’d brushed aside the objections from his retainers, dismissing any concerns about the authority of the þjóðann and had gone to greet her himself.

Yuuto had recently lost two people that had been close to him, so he couldn’t help but feel anxiety over the safety of someone as close to him as Sigrún. Although he knew that Sigrún was the one best suited for the job, it was still a risky endeavor to send her off with a small force to capture the enemy capital. Yuuto had found himself getting increasingly nervous about her safety as the days passed after her departure.

“Father...! You were *that* worried about me?”

Sigrún, too, trembled, moved beyond words as Yuuto held her.



People tend to express their feelings through their actions. She felt Yuuto's feelings loud and clear through his touch.

"It's good that you two feel so strongly for one another, but there are others present."

Felicia cleared her throat as she addressed the pair.

"Oh. S-Sorry. I just couldn't help myself..."

Chastised, Yuuto came to his senses and hurriedly let go of Sigrún.

Glaðsheimr had the largest population of Yggdrasil's cities and was also one of its major trading hubs. The front gates literally overflowed with people, and they all watched intently as the couple exchanged a warm embrace. Even Yuuto found being exposed to this much public scrutiny a tad embarrassing.

As an aside, this moment would eventually become a staple among the bards of Glaðsheimr as a great romantic epic and cause Yuuto many headaches, but that was a story for another day.

"Ahem. A-Anyway... Well done. It's thanks to your efforts that we were able to beat back the Flame Clan in this most recent battle."

Yuuto cleared his throat as though to take a second stab at his presentation and offered Sigrún words of praise. He simply stated the plain, unadorned truth. Without the tireless work of Sigrún and her men, the Flame Clan would have conquered Glaðsheimr, and Yuuto himself might have been slain.

Taking the Flame Clan's grain stores greatly restricted the Flame Clan's advance, and the supplies would be extremely useful in advancing his emigration plans to their new home. It was a victory worth its weight in gold.

"You honor me with your praise. Nothing pleases me more than the thought of being of use to you, Father."

Sigrún bit her lower lip shyly, and her cheeks turned a rich shade of red upon hearing Yuuto's praise. She was, by all appearances, a blushing maiden. It was a totally different reaction to when Sigrún was praised by others, where she would dryly respond with an "I see" or "Yes, thank you."

Yuuto and Felicia were well-acquainted with the way in which Sigrún reacted

to praise from Yuuto, but those who had accompanied her on this latest mission —people such as the members of the Maidens of the Waves—had evidently only known her as an unsmiling stoic, and found themselves only able to stare in shock. They couldn't believe what they were seeing.

“My strength barely merits note. All I did was follow your orders, Father. What forced the Flame Clan to retreat was not my work, but rather the effectiveness of your strategy.”

Ordinarily, such words would be considered false modesty or flattery, but that was never the case with Sigrún. Her worship of Yuuto was matched only by Felicia in the Steel Clan. Sigrún's words were almost certainly sincere.

“Oh c'mon, that's being way too modest, Mother Rún. No one other than us would've been able to make it back home!” Hildegard said proudly, in sharp contrast with Sigrún's modesty. She was known for causing Sigrún countless headaches with her blunt honesty and lack of tact, but she was outdoing herself this time.

“Hilda! I keep telling you to watch your tongue!”

“Ow, ow! But if we don't tell him what actually happened, we won't get the praise we deserve!”

“I've already praised you, haven't I?!”

“I'd like His Majesty's praise too!”

“Don't trouble Father with your selfishness!”

“Ow ow ow! S-Stop, Mother Rún! That really hurts!”

“Then learn your lesson!”

“Mrrrgh! I'm not gonna let a little thing like this stop me!”

Hildegard continued to argue, even as Sigrún squeezed her head in an iron grip. At a glance, it simply looked like they were playing.

According to Felicia, Sigrún's childhood friend and partner in crime, Sigrún often complained about Hildegard, but she still had a keen fondness for the youngster. They'd even settled into referring to one another by the nicknames Hilda and Mother Rún.

For Yuuto's part, he found the sight heartwarming, and it gave him a glimpse into an unexpected side of Sigrún, so he had decided to just sit back and watch, until he heard what came next...

"Things really were pretty bad this time! You need to make sure His Majesty understands that!"

"Oh? Do tell me more, Hildegard."

He *was* going to sit back and watch, but he couldn't let those words go unaddressed.

Even if Sigrún's Múspells had been in the middle of enemy territory, the core of the Flame Clan's strength had been occupied with the Glaðsheimr offensive, so Yuuto had judged that despite the numerical odds, the Múspells had a good chance of victory. He had made certain to warn Sigrún to keep a close eye on the enemy's strength and to immediately withdraw if it seemed the risk was too high. The fact that they had faced a great deal of danger despite those precautions was a problem that Yuuto had to address.

Because of her almost fanatical loyalty to Yuuto, Sigrún tended to push herself too far for his sake. While it was necessary to have the courage to risk one's life in battle, a general also needed the ability to know when to retreat. If Sigrún had recklessly put her life and those of her subordinates in danger, then he needed to chastise her for that fact.

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

With Yuuto on her side, Hildegard perked up.

She straightened to attention and delivered her report (or, as Sigrún would likely have put it, she snitched).

"After we finished our conquest of Blíkjanda-Böl and were waiting for the ships to pick us up, we came under assault by a Flame Clan cavalry unit."

"...I see. Not surprising that they have cavalry units of their own."

Yuuto had read that Nobunaga had nothing but praise for the strength of Takeda Shingen. The Takeda Clan's greatest military asset was their cavalry. No doubt Nobunaga knew just how effective cavalry could be. This was particularly

true in Yggdrasil, which was blessed with a great many more open plains than Japan, a region that was, for the most part, mountainous. This provided many more opportunities for the effective use of cavalry. Nobunaga, of course, knew about the existence of stirrups, and with his strategic genius, it would have been stranger had Nobunaga not formed cavalry units of his own.

“I should have told you about that possibility. My apologies.”

“No, Father, you made certain to order me to put the safety of my people first and to retreat without putting ourselves at excessive risk. The fact that we’ve returned safely is thanks to your wisdom,” Sigrún returned without missing a beat. However, when Yuuto turned his gaze to Hildegard...

“We were indeed safe in the end, but things were dicey for a bit. The Flame Clan General Shiba was *really* strong...”

She quickly blabbed out the truth. Sigrún glared daggers at Hildegard but didn’t make any moves to cover Hildegard’s mouth. It seemed that Yuuto’s request for more details had the desired effect.

“Oh, *that* tough, huh?”

The name Shiba had been fresh in Yuuto’s memory. The general had left an impression by holding out for a long time against the Steel Clan soldiers who had been fighting like berserker heroes under the influence of Fagrahvél’s Gjallarhorn.

“Yes! He was so strong that even the monstrously strong Mother Rún was forced into a defensive fight!”

“Rún was *what*?!”

Yuuto’s expression tensed.

Having evolved through countless encounters with powerful opponents and triumphing in hard-fought battles, Sigrún’s fighting ability was remarkable, even by the standards of the Einherjar. While he had only heard stories of it, her strength when she was in the Realm of Godspeed was such that even Skáviðr and Hveðrungr flat out stated they couldn’t beat her. And yet, here it was being claimed that Shiba could overwhelm her...

“That means he might very well be at the level of that idiot.”

“Indeed, I got a similar impression.” Sigrún nodded as though in agreement.

“Ludicrous. Was he also a twin-runed Einherjar?”

“I wasn’t able to confirm, but I believe he only has one rune. His strength didn’t seem superhuman. If I were to describe it, it would be more appropriate to say that he had mastered normal strength.”

“I see... That’s a problem.”

It was true that Steinþórr’s strength had been overwhelming, but from Yuuto’s point of view, Steinþórr had merely been physically strong. Steinþórr had been far too used to winning. He lacked the drive to cling to victory, instead putting too much weight on his desire to enjoy a battle as a result of his massive overconfidence. However, based on Sigrún and Hildegard’s description, the Flame Clan general had no trace of anything similar.

“It is, yes. He was a powerful opponent. I’ll be sure to defeat him next time, however.”

“True. You’re probably the only one who can handle a monster like that. But, well, for now, well done on fighting an opponent like that and coming back in one piece. I really am relieved to see you back.”

Yuuto let out a deep sigh of relief. Even though he had Sigrún standing there in front of him, safe and sound, just hearing about Shiba had made his stomach twist into knots.

“If I’d lost you along with Skáviðr, I don’t think I could’ve recovered.”

“...I had heard as much on my way here. So it’s true that Brother Ská died in battle.”

“Yes. He died to protect everyone. He went out in a way that was typical of him.”

“I... I see. I’m sorry to hear it. There was much I still wanted to learn from him.”

Sigrún looked down, letting out a pained sigh. It was rare for her to show emotion over anyone other than Yuuto. She must have felt a great deal of

admiration and gratitude to Skáviðr, both as her teacher and as her predecessor as Mánagarmr.

“Yes, me too. But as a patriarch, I can’t just wallow in sadness. There’s plenty that I have to do. One thing I need to do is figure out a successor to him as patriarch of the Panther Clan.”

“The Second isn’t going to succeed him?”

“No. Frankly, I don’t think he’s up to it.”

Yuuto pursed his lips and shook his head.

Skáviðr, before becoming Panther Clan patriarch, had been the Assistant Second of the Wolf Clan. The current Panther Clan Second had been Skáviðr’s aide at the time and had followed him to the Panther Clan. While it wasn’t that the Second was lacking in ability or character, he hadn’t distinguished himself even in the relatively small Wolf Clan. The Panther Clan, in terms of the size of its territory and the productivity of its land, was comparable to the Horn Clan; it was one of the largest clans in the Steel Clan. Yuuto didn’t think the current Second had enough ability to run a clan of that size.

To put it bluntly, it would be like placing a department chief at a small company at the helm of a massive multinational corporation. There was a very real possibility that there would be those who wouldn’t accept placing the Second as patriarch and refuse his chalice. Yuuto didn’t have the luxury of dealing with that sort of internal discord at this particular moment.

“Which is why I intend for you to succeed him.”

“...Pardon?”

It was rather apparent that she hadn’t been expecting the news. Sigrún blinked her eyes in surprise. She was pretty cute when she did that.

“Wait! Please, wait a moment! Huh?! M-Me?!”

“Yes, I don’t think there’s anyone better suited for it. Based on your accomplishments, I don’t think anyone will object.”

“S-Surely there are other people suited to the role. O-Oh, I know! Someone like Uncle Hveðrungr or Aunt Sigyn!”

The two she mentioned had already been patriarchs of the Panther Clan before Skáviðr. Certainly, they had the ability and character, but...

“The people of the Panther Clan wouldn’t accept them.”

The current Panther Clan territory once belonged to the Hoof Clan. To the people of those lands, Hveðrungr and Sigyn were invaders, and they were also tyrants who had pillaged and destroyed their lands as rulers. From their point of view, there was plenty of reason to rebel against being ruled by either of the pair a second time.

“Th-Then, um, uhh...”

Sigrún tried to think of an alternative, but evidently, none came to mind. It seemed she had no intention of throwing in the towel yet, though.

“B-But... I’m a mere warrior and have almost no knowledge of governing, so I’m hardly...”

“In that regard, I’m sure the current Panther Clan Second and Bömburr, your Second-in-Command, will support you. Besides, from the viewpoint of giving you a proper reward for your massive achievements, it sets a bad example if I keep passing you over for patriarch.”

“Erm...”

Even Sigrún had no reply to that.

If there was no chance of promotion or reward for effort, people would quickly become demoralized, and the organization itself would lose its vibrancy. It was the responsibility and duty of those in command to reward those who serve under them. Of course, Sigrún should be acutely aware of that, but...

“B-But... If I become patriarch, I’d have to spend my time in the Panther Clan’s territories, yes? I-I know that it’s selfish of me to say this, but I would prefer to be at your side, Father, rather than ruling as a patriarch...”

She appealed to him with puppy-dog eyes. Evidently, this was her real reason for wanting to turn down the appointment. There was no such thing as a man who wouldn’t be flattered by being this loved by a woman as beautiful as Sigrún. Yuuto couldn’t help but tussle Sigrún’s hair before continuing.

“That was always the plan, so relax. I have no intention of sending you away. You’re the commander of my personal retinue, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Ah, o-of course! Is it wise to have me remain by your side even after making me into a patriarch?”

“What they need is a symbol. Someone to bring the people of their clan together.”

After all, Yuuto still had to execute the difficult task of carrying out the emigration plan. The most valuable asset at that point would be whether or not the leaders had the charisma to get their people to follow them. Sigrún, with her many battlefield accomplishments as well as her beauty, was second only to Yuuto in the Steel Clan in that regard. She was a symbol of the Steel Clan’s continual victories in war, and many soldiers worshiped her as they did Yuuto. There was no one better suited to serve as a symbol for those under her.

Over the next three days, the administrative matters related to Sigrún ascending to the throne of patriarch of the Panther Clan proceeded without delay.

“Then, Lady Sigrún. Please switch seats with the departed patriarch. With that, you are now the patriarch of the Panther Clan.”

“Congratulations!”

The moment Sigrún took her seat on the throne of the Panther Clan patriarch, the formal and stoic atmosphere broke into a flurry of applause and cheers. It was the birth of Sigrún, Seventh Patriarch of the Panther Clan.

“I’m counting on you now more than ever, Rún.”

“Yes, Father. I intend to work even harder for you.”

When Yuuto called over to her, Sigrún remained seated and bowed low, placing her hands on the ground. She was still stiffly formal despite the fact the ceremony had come to an end.

But that was the essence of Sigrún as a woman.

“Congratulations, Rún. You’ve become a patriarch at the young age of twenty.

I'm envious."

"Hrmph! Don't say something you don't mean."

In sharp contrast, Sigrún returned the congratulatory words from her childhood friend and partner-in-crime Felicia with a curt note of dismissal. Yuuto felt a twinge of envy over the display of their easy camaraderie. There was just something a little too stiff and formal about how Sigrún interacted with him. He knew it was a sign of her loyalty, but...

"So you're a patriarch at last, Ma'am. Congratulations. It does feel long-awaited."

Next came the cheerful congratulations of Bömburr, the Second-in-Command of the Múspell Unit. Even though he hadn't had a drop of alcohol, Bömburr's expression was flushed with joy. The woman he had admired and supported as his sworn mother had become the ruler of her own clan. No doubt it was a moving occasion for him.

"I'm just a symbol. It bears mentioning that you too have gained quite the promotion, no? Assistant Second of the Panther Clan Bömburr?"

"Heh, I've been blessed to be pulled up in your wake."

"That's false modesty, Bömburr. Father continually lectures me about the importance of logistical support. The accomplishments of the Múspells and myself have only been possible because of the foundation your shoulders provide, Bömburr."

"D-Don't make me cry, Ma'am!"

Bömburr couldn't help but tear up at Sigrún's words. Despite his usual studied nonchalance and ability to hide what he's usually thinking, even Bömburr was overcome with emotion at today's events.

"Waaaaaaah! I'm so happy! I'm so, so haaaappy!"

Hildegard could be heard weeping loudly. Sigrún's eyes went wide with surprise.

"I thought you were going to offer me some sort of barbed congratulations."

Sigrún had clearly been caught off guard by Hildegard's show of emotion. It

seemed the comment had been too much even for Hildegard to bear, and she tearfully protested.

“What a terrible thing to say! What do you think I am, anyway?!”

“Well, I figured because it was you, you’d say something like, ‘Well, enjoy it while it lasts. I’ll overtake you before you know it!’”

“Well, sure, I was going to say that, but!”

“See?”

As though she was pleased that order had returned to her world, Sigrún nodded at Hildegard’s remark. She was an older sister who knew her chalice younger sister all too well.

“B-But, Mother Rún, you’re the only one who’s ever taken so much time and effort in dealing with me, so of course I’d be happy at your success! Waaaaah!”

It seemed that her own comments touched upon her emotions, and Hildegard burst out into a loud bawl. Hildegard had been notable for her arrogance when she joined the Múspells. Her personality meant that most people regarded her as a nuisance, and no doubt many people who could have mentored her had instead lost their patience and abandoned her. Further, her talent and strength as an Einherjar had made it difficult for most people to chastise her or lecture her about her habits, which was why to Hildegard, setting aside anything to do with their chalice relationship, Sigrún had been both a parent and an older sister.

“Sniff. Besides... Mother Rún, you’re just too selfless. Sniffle, th-that’s part of your charm, Mother Rún, but it was always frustrating to watch.”

“Hm? Frustrating? Why?”

Sigrún tilted her head curiously at Hildegard’s statement. Yuuto chuckled softly to himself. Someone who could compartmentalize and accept reality like Sigrún probably couldn’t understand Hildegard’s feelings.

“Your accomplishments on the battlefield are amazing, Mother Rún! You’re by far the most accomplished warrior in the Steel Clan. Yet all these newer members of the Steel Clan get precedence over you just because they’re the

patriarch of a clan of their own! Of course I find that frustrating!”

At Hildegard’s impassioned argument, the other members of the Múspell Unit nodded along in agreement.

“Please watch your tone, Aunt Hildegard. It’s a bit presumptuous.”

Alone among the Múspells, Bömburr chided Hildegard in a tone enough to ring through the temple, before following up with...

“But thank you for putting our feelings into words. You should, however, do well to remember that there are many of those very same patriarchs filling this temple right now,” he said in a softer voice and winked. It seemed he felt the same way.

Yuuto had placed many clans under his control after starting the Steel Clan. There were many minor clans among those clans, and those clans had little in the way of forces and just as little in the way of accomplishments since they had joined the Steel Clan. The patriarchs of those clans took precedence over someone like Sigrún, despite her having the most battlefield accolades of anyone in the Steel Clan. No doubt the members of the Múspell Unit also had the self-confidence that they were the ones who had been leading the Steel Clan’s progress. There was no way they found the old state of affairs to be satisfactory.

“Looks like you’ve got good children, Rún.”

Yuuto lightly patted Sigrún’s shoulder. She nodded firmly, with the faintest blush on her cheeks.

“Yes. They’re much better children than I deserve.”

This party—an official ceremony—served an extremely important political purpose as a place for leaders to mingle and socialize. After all, important people from the entire organization were gathered for such an occasion. It was a perfect event to meet new people and forge connections, or even just revisit existing relationships. It provided an opportunity to make observations on the character and ability of the various important people in attendance and to exchange useful information.

It went without saying that countless people wanted to meet and speak to Yuuto, who was both þjóðann of Yggdrasil and reginarch of the Steel Clan. While his encounters with old friends such as Linnea and Jörgen were opportunities for Yuuto to enjoy a pleasant conversation and reminisce, the other encounters tended to be intricate verbal battles of trying to outfox the opponent. Yuuto, who didn't enjoy that sort of verbal sparring, found these occasions to be tiresome.

“Father, I offer my sincere thanks for providing me with excellent new connections.”

A strikingly beautiful blonde woman appeared in front of Yuuto as he was recouping from dealing with his last ten well-wishers. It was Fagrahvél, the patriarch of the Sword Clan. Behind her was a group of distinguished and refined men who each looked as though they were challenging customers to deal with in their own right. They were the patriarchs of the Shield, Armor, and Helm Clans who had become Fagrahvél's younger brothers in the Ceremony of Brotherhood between the Arms and Armor Clans that had taken place prior to Sigrún's accession ceremony.

“Ah, I'm glad to see you here. I look forward to your contributions to the Steel Clan.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

The four patriarchs of the Arms and Armor Clans replied crisply to Yuuto. Their gazes as they looked upon Yuuto gleamed with ambition. No doubt they were looking for a direct chalice relationship with Yuuto to secure their place in the Steel Clan hierarchy.

With the Steel Clan's growth, there had also been a proportional increase in the complications within the clan. Yuuto still needed to value those who had joined his cause first. Not only that, if he were to freely grant his chalice, it would greatly cheapen its value. For that reason, he had made them first swear the Oath of the Chalice with Fagrahvél, a fellow patriarch of the Arms and Armor Clans.

However, they were all patriarchs of clans of both immense scale and storied histories that, by all accounts, already made them worthy of entering into a

direct relationship with Yuuto. It would have been more surprising if they harbored no complaints about being forced to enter into an indirect relationship with him first.

With that in mind, Yuuto offered them the words that they wanted to hear.

“Our clan fundamentally works on merit. If you produce results, I’ll happily give you my chalice in return.”

Upon hearing those words, the three patriarchs aside from Fagrahvél swallowed.

It was at that moment that Yuuto’s suspicion turned to conviction. It seemed he was right about their current frame of mind. Yuuto maintained his curt expression even as, internally, he rubbed his hands together in glee.

“Do remember, though... The chalice of the reginarch and þjóðann doesn’t come cheaply. If you truly want it, you better bring something worthy of it.”

“Of course, Your Majesty!”

At Yuuto’s encouragement, they replied even more enthusiastically than before. The embers of ambition in their eyes had flared into a blazing fire.

One couldn’t stay on top with just compassion. Offering encouragement to one’s subordinates and motivating them was another important job of a leader.

“Yo, Bro. How you feeling?”

Having dealt with the first wave of well-wishers, Yuuto cheerfully called over to the man sitting on the throne of the departed. He was an odd-looking man wearing an ominous black mask.

In that sense, the masked man was perhaps the best standin for Skáviðr, the recently deceased patriarch of the Panther Clan. The man’s name was Hveðrungr. He had once served as patriarch of the very Panther Clan that Sigrún had just ascended to the throne of. While he preferred to avoid official ceremonies and celebrations, his connection to the occasion had given Yuuto an excuse to drag him into attending the event.

“Not great.”

Hveðrungr glared sidelong at Yuuto before taking a long pull from his cup.

In the initial stages of the Siege of Glaðsheimr, Hveðrungr had been caught in Oda Nobunaga's trap and had ended up seriously injured, which resulted in him remaining sidelined through the rest of the battle.

"Does something still hurt? Are you having trouble moving a part of your body?" Yuuto asked as he plopped down in front of him.

Three months had already passed since Hveðrungr had suffered his injuries. At a glance, it appeared that his wounds had healed, but how Hveðrungr's own body felt was a subjective issue, and there was no way for Yuuto to tell for certain from the outside.

"My physical wounds healed fine."

With that, Hveðrungr took another swig from his cup. Yuuto understood what Hveðrungr meant with his phrasing.

"Ah, the Independent Cavalry Regiment?"

In the battle where Hveðrungr had suffered his wounds, his unit, the Independent Cavalry Regiment, had also taken catastrophic losses. Yuuto had heard that the regiment had lost nearly half its number.

"Yeah. I've been on a losing streak lately. The last battle in particular was bad. I've had several people obliquely suggest retirement."

"...I see."

Yuuto offered only those words while refilling Hveðrungr's cup.

Hveðrungr's abilities as a general weren't bad. If anything, Yuuto considered him an excellent commander. No doubt the members of the Independent Cavalry Regiment also knew of Hveðrungr's capabilities—the very same capabilities that had taken the Panther Clan, a minor clan in the Miðgarðr region, and turned it into one of the three greatest clans in Yggdrasil.

Still, in the end, all that mattered in society was results. Hveðrungr had consistently found himself on the losing end of battles ever since he had started a war with Yuuto's Wolf Clan. While that was simply because he faced extremely powerful opponents, war was a business where those who fought

them believed in the value of luck. After all, one's life was always on the line. It was understandable that soldiers wouldn't want to fight under a general who had been spurned by fate.

"Even if I wanted to wipe the stain off my record, there's not much I can do if my men won't follow me. Heh, I've certainly fallen rather far."

Hveðrungr let out a self-deprecating snort before taking another draw from his cup.

It was a difficult problem to solve. If Yuuto exercised his authority and declared his intention to leave Hveðrungr in his role, no doubt the calls for him to retire would die down. The most likely outcome from that would be the regiment's collapse as the soldiers refused to follow an unlucky commander, however. After a moment's thought, Yuuto spoke up.

"Don't yell at me for this, Brother, but why don't you leave the Independent Cavalry Regiment with Rún?"

"...You're going to tell me to retire as well?"

The glare from behind the mask intensified.

Even if he hadn't been particularly lucky of late, Hveðrungr was still a great man who had created a great clan in a single generation and was a swordsman on par with Sigrún and Skáviðr. His glare was still intimidating, and even Yuuto had to swallow a lump in his throat before he continued.

"We don't have the resources to leave a man of your abilities to a happy retirement. There's a job I can only ask of someone like you. I need you to serve as Skáviðr's replacement."

"...Oh?"

Hveðrungr's eyes widened, and he set down his cup. It seemed that had piqued his interest. Of course, Skáviðr's formal successor was, just as the ceremony had stated, Sigrún. Hveðrungr was well aware of that fact. What Yuuto was referring to was the other, shadowy role that Skáviðr had filled.

"There's always going to be a nasty side to running a country. There are things that need to be done, no matter what that does to the reputation of the person

doing those things. Skáviðr had gone out of his way to take on those jobs for me.”

The most public example was executing those who had broken laws or military regulations. Skáviðr had also taken on the role of a frightening boogeyman to keep the soldiers in check. He had performed various deeds that had ended up making him into an object of fear and loathing. It was the kind of role in which no one else wanted to serve. However, Skáviðr had *volunteered* to do those jobs, going out of his way to handle other similarly reviled tasks for the sake of Yuuto. By doing so, Skáviðr had made Yuuto’s job substantially easier.

“So you want me to do those things, huh? What a thankless job.”

“It certainly is.”

Hveðrungr snorted derisively, prompting a self-deprecating laugh from Yuuto.

While the harsh legalism of Shang Yang and Wu Qi had brought prosperity to their respective kingdoms, the men themselves had been reviled, and the moment that the kings that had valued them passed, Shang Yang was executed on trumped-up charges of sedition, while Wu Qi had been assassinated. Considering that those were the results of bringing prosperity to their countries, it really was a thankless job.

“But it’s a job someone has to do. And it’s not something just anyone can do either.”

At first, Yuuto had planned to do the job himself, but as the symbolic leader that the empire and country needed to rally around, it would be self-defeating if the people not only feared him but actively hated him. That was particularly true now. Similarly, while Sigrún may have had the personality to fill such a role, her accomplishments were such that she was a beloved public figure, a positive symbol for the people, making it difficult for her to serve in that role. In Felicia’s case, she simply wouldn’t be able to stomach the role.

“Frankly, I think you’re the best suited for the job,” Yuuto said without a trace of flattery.

The most important attributes for that role were the ruthlessness to abandon any compassion when it counted and a mental toughness to deal with the

consequences of one's actions. In that sense, Hveðrungr was more than willing to act ruthlessly when needed, and he wasn't one to take any emotional damage from being reviled. Further, the fact that he was Yuuto's sworn younger brother worked in his favor. The role of a watcher was best filled by someone who wasn't too close to the center of authority. That made Hveðrungr ideal for the role.

"We're going to need to force people to leave their homes and emigrate to a new land. It's impossible to do that without everyone's consent. There's going to be resistance. I need someone who can put down that resistance."

"So you want me to sacrifice myself on that altar."

"Yeah, that's right. I feel sick saying it, but yeah," Yuuto said with a dry, bitter laugh.

Yuuto was essentially telling Hveðrungr to do the dirty work so that Yuuto himself could remain a shining symbol for the people. He was telling Hveðrungr to be the target of all the anger and hatred that should be directed at Yuuto. No matter how it was phrased, it was an act of terrible self-serving cowardice. Yuuto couldn't help but hate himself for needing to do such a thing, but even that was just his ego wanting to avoid dealing with the harsh reality and remain pure. To accomplish great things, he needed to get rid of that sort of sentimentality. With the loss of the man who had voluntarily taken on the dirty work, Yuuto now needed to become a man who could live with and process both the good and the evil required of being a leader.

"Heh, that naive little boy has become quite the cold-hearted ruler, it seems."

Hveðrungr snorted in amusement.

While he now went by Hveðrungr, he was once Loptr, Second of the Wolf Clan, and was well acquainted with what Yuuto was like when he first came to Yggdrasil. He knew the Yuuto who had once been nothing more than an ignorant child. As someone who had been at the mercy of a child like that, no doubt he wanted to voice a complaint or two. Yet, a moment later, Hveðrungr's lips quirked in a smile.

"That's the least a patriarch needs to be able to do."

“Ah! So you’ll do it?!”

“I was never a good apprentice to him, but I’ll at least clean up after my master as a funeral offering.”

Hveðrungr let out a soft sigh and stared upward. There was a certain sadness visible on his face.

Yuuto had heard that Hveðrungr had been trained from childhood by Skáviðr. No doubt no one could understand the bond that the two had shared over those years. While they had clashed blades multiple times, Hveðrungr was still struck with a sentimental longing now that he’d lost Skáviðr.

“Mm.”

Yuuto lifted the bottle of wine in his hand.

“Heh.”

Hveðrungr responded by lifting his cup and taking the offered wine. He then took a deep pull. There was no need for words at a moment like this. The wine in question was the very same drink that Skáviðr had enjoyed more than anything before his death.



“So we’re finally ready.”

Although it was the day after a celebratory occasion, Yuuto had spent the morning deep in thought, gazing down at the map spread out on the desk in front of him. With the addition of the three Arms and Armor clans, the defenses around Glaðsheimr were now secure. When he added in the return of Sigrún and the Maidens of the Waves, he also had his capable commanders on hand. Having prepared his forces over the last month, he was now ready to set off on his campaign. All that remained was for him to issue an edict stating his intentions to conquer Jötunheimr.

“Honestly, I underestimated the Silk Clan’s strength.”

His gaze fell upon the crossed-out rune representing the Tiger Clan on the map. Reports from the Vindálfs indicated that the Tiger Clan had fallen after a Silk Clan invasion had taken their capital in a mere five days.

“So their army numbers about twenty thousand?”

The Ten Great Clans, comprising clans such as the Hoof and Lightning Clans, could only muster a force of about ten thousand troops at the height of their prosperity. The Silk Clan was able to mobilize twice that number.

“And it appears they were equipped with iron weapons and armor,” his adjutant Felicia added with a tense expression.

In Yggdrasil, ironworking was still in its infancy—bronze was, by and large, the standard alloy used for weapons and armor. The reason the Steel and Flame Clans had been able to overwhelm other clans and rapidly spread their influence was largely because they had the ability to mass-produce iron—a metal that was better suited to weapons and armor because of its superior toughness, sharpness, and ease of production.

“Does the Silk Clan have someone sent from the gods like you, Big Brother?”

“I can’t say for certain, but I think the chances of that are low.”

Yuuto shook his head in response to Felicia’s question. One piece of evidence in favor of his assumption was the presence of chariots. From the reports, it appeared that the Silk Clan Army had fielded quite a few of them. They were

the most powerful weapon available in Yggdrasil, but they were a technology that, historically, disappeared after the advent of the stirrup and the creation of cavalry units. If the Silk Clan had someone who had come from the future like Nobunaga or himself, it would have been strange for the Silk Clan to have made use of iron smelting but not developed stirrups for their armies.

“They probably discovered how to smelt iron on their own.”

He had already accounted for the possibility that a clan would eventually discover iron-smelting on their own. His research into the world’s history had taught him that the Hittite Empire had developed iron-smelting in the 18th century BCE, several centuries ahead of its surrounding kingdoms. Yuuto’s estimate of the current year in Yggdrasil was approximately 1500 BCE, give or take a century or two. With that in mind, there would have been nothing historically unusual about one of Yggdrasil’s clans having learned how to do it on their own.

“Hiding the true extent of their armies is one thing, but it’s another entirely for them to have managed to hide the fact that they know how to smelt iron. They completely caught me by surprise,” Kristina answered sourly.

The Jötunheimr campaign was being planned using the information gathered by her Vindálfs. Iron smelting vastly increased the strength of a clan and on its own was enough to render many assumptions about the Silk Clan useless. With that in mind, the campaign’s planning now required substantial revisions. As head of the Steel Clan’s intelligence collection, Kristina was no doubt incredibly frustrated at the fact that the Silk Clan had managed to pull the wool over her eyes so artfully.

“Well, there’s not much we can do about that now. It seems the Silk Clan had been hiding the fact they could make iron.”

They had kept it as a trump card for their recent invasion of the Tiger Clan.

There was an enormous difference between knowing about the enemy’s capabilities ahead of time and learning about it mid-battle. The sheer despair that rippled through the Tiger Clan’s soldiers when they suddenly learned that the weapons and armor they had trusted their lives to didn’t work against their opponents must have been utterly unbearable.

The fact that the Silk Clan had taken the Tiger Clan's capital with such speed and power also spoke to their careful planning. They had been very careful to conceal information from the public as part of that planning. It would have been one thing if Kristina herself had gone to gather the information, but there was a limit to what she could discover using her subordinates. There probably wasn't anything they could have done to learn about the Silk Clan's iron equipment in this case.

"Regardless... Their combined silk and iron production, along with the fact that they can field a force of twenty thousand soldiers, makes the Silk Clan a remarkably powerful opponent for this era. Frankly, I couldn't believe the reports when I first saw them."

Yuuto leaned back in his chair, which creaked beneath his weight. He meant every word of praise he directed at the Silk Clan. Yuuto could only marvel at the fact that they had invented two of the great innovations of history without resorting to cheats as he had.

"Still, they stand no chance against the Steel Clan, Father."

"You're right."

Yuuto nodded with a self-deprecating smile at Kristina's words.

Certainly, it was true that the Silk Clan's strength as a clan was remarkable for this period and would present a challenge in and of itself. It wouldn't have been surprising if they had spread their influence to all of Yggdrasil over the next ten years. However, that would only have happened if Yuuto and Nobunaga had not been present. In that sense, Yuuto almost felt apologetic for showing up in this land.

Yuuto had gifted the Steel Clan with much more than iron-smelting. Even from a military standpoint, he had developed the long-spear, tetsuhau, stirrups, bows, and trebuchets. They were all things that either the Silk Clan lacked, or if they had them, their versions of such innovations were vastly inferior in performance to the Steel Clan's own. No matter how impressive the Silk Clan was relative to this era, there was no comparison in terms of power.

Yuuto nodded deeply before he made his declaration.

“Well then. The Steel Clan will now begin its conquest of Jötunheimr.”

“I’m home!”

“Welcome home, Yuu-kun! Lunch is ready!”

Having finished his work for the morning, Yuuto returned to his room in the depths of the Valaskjálf Palace, where his beloved wife was waiting with a beaming smile.

On the table in the middle of the room sat a large bowl topped with what appeared to be chicken and fluffily prepared egg whites. Sitting beneath the eggs was probably white rice. The steam rising from the dish was filled with the distinct scent of soy sauce.

It was oyakodon. However he looked at it, it couldn’t have possibly been anything else. Next to it was a bowl of clam miso soup and pickled daikon radish.

It was the kind of meal that seemed rather out of place upon the þjóðann’s table. It was a thoroughly Japanese family meal. To Yuuto, however, it was a meal that not even the most extravagant feast could measure up to.

“Oh man, this food looks delicious! I’m not exaggerating when I say that I come home just to eat stuff like this!”

“Aww, how mean! Don’t you think, Nozomu, Miku? Daddy’s so mean. He’s not here to see you two!”

Mitsuki pouted and addressed the twins who babbled inside the crib that Ingrid had crafted with care. They were Yuuto and Mitsuki’s children, and at two months of age, they were well into their adorable phase as babies.

“Hey! Don’t put weird thoughts into their heads! Of course, the real reason I come back to this room is to see you two! I mean it!”

Yuuto peered into the crib in a panic, pleading with his children within. While most people don’t usually remember the things that happened to them as babies very clearly, they might very well retain those things as subconscious memories. If the twins ended up hating or resenting him over comments like

these, Yuuto would be crushed by regret. He wanted to make sure they knew just how much he loved them.

“Hmph! So you don’t care about seeing me, huh?”

“Well, yeah, I’ve known your face for most of my life.”

“How awful! Is that how you talk to your loving wife who followed you all the way to another world?!”

Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks in displeasure. Yuuto loved seeing that particular expression on her face. He loved it because it kept him grounded—it kept him in touch with ordinary life. That was probably why he often affectionately teased her. There was such a thing as going too far, however.

“Really though, I’ve known you for all these years, and I never grow tired of seeing it,” Yuuto chuckled and said in a serious tone.

“Huh?!”

Mitsuki’s face turned beet red upon hearing Yuuto’s comment. The words had done their magic on Mitsuki and made her heart skip a beat. Not one to waste a good opportunity, he quickly followed through.

“I never grow tired of teasing you,” he said and winked.

Mitsuki blinked in surprise for a moment, before her brows furrowed in anger.

“Graaah! Then I’m going back to my family!”

“How do you intend to do that?”

“Okay, fine! I’ll report today’s events to my mom and dad.”

“I’m sorry!”

Yuuto promptly surrendered, bowing his head so deeply in apology that his forehead touched the table. She was far more frightening than any enemy he’d ever faced in Yggdrasil.

“Hmph!”

Mitsuki puffed out her cheeks and turned away. Three seconds later, both of them burst out laughing. It seemed that neither could keep up the charade for

much longer. The exchange was wholly based on a mutual understanding that they were teasing one another. The þjóðanns were today, as they were every day, a loving couple.

“Why don’t we end our little comedy skit here and eat before our food gets cold?”

“Oh, yeah, sure. Let’s dig in!”

The pair chatted about random matters as they ate.

While Yuuto had been concerned about Mitsuki’s health after she gave birth to twins, the fact that she was nursing twins meant that, if anything, she was eating more than she had before and was doing better than ever.

Yggdrasil’s standards of medical care were abysmal, so Yuuto couldn’t help but feel relief at how well Mitsuki seemed to be doing. He could relax and focus on the task at hand. Had Mitsuki’s health been in question, no doubt he would have been sick with worry.

Eventually, Yuuto finished his oyakodon, not even leaving so much as a single grain of rice in his bowl. He patted his stomach in satisfaction.

“So, it’s tomorrow,” Yuuto said to Mitsuki.

“Okay, gotcha.”

Mitsuki didn’t bother to ask what. He had told her long before this point that he was going to be undertaking a campaign in Jötunheimr.

“Then be careful. Don’t get hurt, okay?”

“Yeah, I know. I’m leaving the babies in your care.”

“Of course! Leave them to me!”

They nodded to one another and their gazes intertwined, and as though naturally drawn to one another, they pressed their lips together in a kiss.

Twenty thousand soldiers were gathered in Glaðsheimr’s city square. They made up the ranks of the army that was about to set off on the conquest of

Jötunheimr. With the addition of the Shield, Armor, and Helm clans, the Steel Clan was now able to mobilize over fifty thousand men, but with the Flame Clan lurking to the south, the Steel Clan couldn't afford to send its entire military to Jötunheimr. The twenty thousand gathered here were the most they could spare for that effort.

While the army setting off to Jötunheimr didn't have an overwhelming numerical advantage over the enemy, it had a remarkable collection of talent. It was being led by Sigrún the Mánagarmr, eight of the Sword Clan's Maidens of the Waves, and Hveðrungr—Grímnir, the Masked Lord, who had once been the patriarch of the Panther Clan. Additionally, they had gathered elites from the other thirteen clans. In total, the Steel Clan's army boasted over thirty Einherjar among its ranks.

The Order of Battle reflected Yuuto's conviction that this was a battle they couldn't afford to lose.

"Welcome, chosen men and women of the Steel Clan!"

Yuuto called out to them from an elevated dais visible to the entire army. On these occasions, Fagrahvél's seiðr of voice amplification was extremely useful. He could easily address everyone, even when speaking to an army of this size.

"We are about to set off for Jötunheimr. As þjóðann, I must punish the Silk Clan for its brazen defiance of my edict forbidding conflict between the clans. By invading the Tiger Clan, the Silk Clan has shown it has no desire to obey my earnest plea for peace on Yggdrasil!"

As Yuuto continued to yell out, he quietly mocked himself for his hypocrisy. His words claimed he wanted peace, but in truth, he had rejoiced at the fact that the Silk Clan's aggression had given him justification to conquer Jötunheimr.

"If we allow the Silk Clan to go unpunished for its barbarism, there will be others who follow their example, and Yggdrasil will once again be consumed by war! We must show the clans of Yggdrasil the fate that awaits those who defy the will of the þjóðann! This is demanded of us to secure peace and order throughout Yggdrasil!"

He managed to get the words out, although they grated on his nerves. Yuuto

had no interest in peace and order in Yggdrasil. There was no point in things like that on a continent that would soon find itself at the bottom of the sea. However, morale was vital in war. People want to believe they're in the right. The ends certainly justified the means in this case. This was a good example of how the role of patriarch came with its burdens.

"I look forward to seeing you fight! All units, advance!"

The loud crash of the gong followed Yuuto's order. The assembled soldiers turned around and made their way toward the city gate. Having watched them depart, Yuuto stepped down from the dais and toward his chariot.

"Father."

Linnea, his Second, called to him. While she was usually busy governing in his stead in Gimlé, she had come to the Holy Capital to attend the chalice ritual for the Arms and Armor Clans, as well as Sigrún's ascension to the throne as the Panther Clan's patriarch, and had remained for a while after.

"We're almost there."

"Yeah, this will open our path to Europe."

Linnea's words had a thousand different emotions behind them, and Yuuto nodded to her as though in agreement.

The conquest of the Jötunheimr region and securing the eastern coast—the pair had spent the last year preparing and earnestly hoping for that to become a reality. A year felt a whole lot longer when there was the constant worry throughout that year that Yggdrasil itself would sink away from under their feet and into the ocean. For the two of them, it had been an extraordinarily long year filled with hard work and late nights. They were so very close to achieving their goal. Even if they were both aware that it was too early to celebrate, they couldn't help the flood of emotions welling up inside them.

"I'm leaving the rest in your hands."

"Yes. I'll make certain everything goes as you planned."

Linnea confidently tapped her chest with her fist.

While initially there had been quite a few among the subordinate clans of the

Steel Clan who had underestimated Linnea due to her youth and delicate appearance, such voices had been silenced over the past year. It was now much more common to hear praise of her skills as an administrator—an impressive level of competency that belied her youth. Linnea had always seemed to have a certain lack of confidence in her own ability, but the last year of effectively governing the Steel Clan had given her the confidence that she had been lacking. Yuuto chuckled at just how dependable she had become.

“Right then. I’m off.”

“Oh, a moment.”

As Yuuto raised his hand to depart, Linnea grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close. Before Yuuto even had time to be surprised at the gesture, her lips pressed against his own. After several seconds, she let go of his collar and smiled.

“For luck. Be well on your journey, Father! May fortune smile upon you!”



“Well, I’m left behind to stand guard again.”

Jörgen sighed out the words, sitting in front of a lonely grave marker that had been erected in a corner of the Valaskjálf Palace. Although its master had departed, the palace was as lively as ever. However, this was a corner that saw very little foot traffic. It was a good spot for someone to rest peacefully.

“If you were still alive, I would at least have had a little more peace. Eh, Skáviðr?”

Jörgen addressed the headstone, but of course, there was no reply. The man buried beneath that headstone was known as a master of defensive warfare. Had he been alive, he would have likely been assigned as one of the assistant commanders of the Holy Capital’s defense and been an enormous help to Jörgen.

“Of course, I’m relieved you’re not here anymore!” Jörgen quipped sarcastically, trying to mask his sadness.

Because they had been of similar rank, Jörgen and Skáviðr had, if anything, spent more time as rivals than as friends. There were countless times that Jörgen had felt threatened by Skáviðr’s growth. There had also been the time that Skáviðr, although simply following the laws decreed by Yuuto, had killed one of Jörgen’s valued children. Jörgen could barely keep track of the number of times he had wished Skáviðr was dead, and yet...

“You have an amazing talent for making me unhappy. Why couldn’t you come back to life? Weren’t you supposed to be unkillable?”

Now that Skáviðr was actually gone, Jörgen felt that something was missing from his life. He had known Skáviðr since the man had taken a direct chalice oath from Fárbauti at the age of thirteen, nearly twenty years ago now. Those twenty years had been a period of decline for the Wolf Clan. There had been the fear of outside invasion and mass hunger stemming from poverty.

Jörgen might never have described Skáviðr as a close friend, but even so, Jörgen still considered Skáviðr to be a valuable comrade who had shared in the pain that had come during the hardest years of the Wolf Clan.

“I’m going to cling to life and enjoy the world that Father is going to create for

us. You just sit back in Valhalla and watch enviously, eh?”

“...The Steel Clan is moving to conquer Jötunheimr?”

Nobunaga furrowed his brow suspiciously at Ran’s report. Yuuto’s decision to make more enemies even though the Steel Clan was already at war with the Flame Clan was, in Nobunaga’s eyes, the height of folly.

“Yes. No doubt they believe that we don’t have the resources to stage another invasion now that they’ve taken much of our food stores,” Ran spat out bitterly.

Shiba, the Flame Clan general who had retaken the clan capital, indicated that the Steel Clan had carried off the looted grain in their ships and burned whatever they couldn’t take with them. While they were still assessing the extent of their losses, it was clear the Steel Clan had robbed the Flame Clan of an enormous amount of grain.

Ran, the Second who governed the Flame Clan as Nobunaga’s right hand, burned with the fury of a thousand suns upon learning of the pillaging.

“We can’t very well feed people with nothing.”

Even the great Nobunaga could only muster a dry laugh in light of these revelations.

Although known for his ability to pull off unexpected and remarkable feats, even he couldn’t create something out of nothing. The fact of the matter was that the production of the farmlands around Blíkjanda-Böl that he had spent the last ten years cultivating and developing had fallen to zero overnight.

The Flame Clan’s tax structure was set up in such a way that half of the earnings went to the clan’s coffers, and the other half was distributed to the clanspeople. Fortunately, the Steel Clan hadn’t pillaged from the people of the region, and for the moment the Flame Clan was making do by buying private stores at extremely high prices. Of course, that wasn’t enough to cover the shortfall, and Nobunaga intended to make up for that shortage by redistributing the excess grain in his conquered territories, but even then, the food situation for the Flame Clan was still dire.

“Suoh Yuuto intends to settle the matter in Jötunheimr by autumn, it would seem.”

Nobunaga rubbed at the bristles on his chin as he analyzed Yuuto’s actions. He was certain that he had forced Yuuto into a corner in the recent battles and that he had done a fair amount of damage to the Steel Clan’s forces. That boy was surely not so foolish to think he could win against Nobunaga with his forces dispersed across the continent.

“I see. It’s true that so long as we don’t face any natural disasters, our food situation will improve after the autumn harvest. So he must intend to absorb Jötunheimr by that point and strengthen his position to overwhelm us with numbers.”

“Mm... Still... It doesn’t quite add up.”

Nobunaga furrowed his brow again.

“If that was the case, he could just attack us. This would be a perfect opportunity to do so.”

War was an extremely taxing activity. There was, of course, the intense physical exertion, but there was also the constant mental strain that came from being face to face with death. The whole exercise was intensely taxing on its participants. Just as it was often said that an army marches on its stomach, without proper meals, soldiers couldn’t exert themselves, and as a result, their morale faltered. An army out on a campaign consumed roughly twice as much food as a comparable number of civilians, and a war with its increased food consumption would be ruinous for the current Flame Clan. Exploiting an enemy’s weaknesses was an iron-clad law of war.

“Perhaps, then, they’re feeling somewhat skittish about that idea based on the fact that they were thoroughly crushed in the last battle?”

“I doubt he’s the sort to be that easily cowed.”

Nobunaga couldn’t quite square Yuuto’s actions with the circumstances, and he tilted his head in thought. The thing that stuck most in Nobunaga’s memory after their meeting at Stórk was the strength of will behind Yuuto’s gaze. He didn’t appear to be the sort who would give up after running into obstacles a

few times.

Even Nobunaga wasn't able to realize that Yuuto's priorities lay elsewhere, and that his highest priority at the moment was to capture Jötunheimr rather than deal with Nobunaga. Nobunaga's sheer ability as a strategist made it impossible for him to consider that possibility.

"Well, either way, it's irritating to have to sit back and watch our enemy expand their influence," Nobunaga stated, making his frustration at the present situation clear.

Currently, the two clans were roughly equal in strength. If the Steel Clan were to conquer Jötunheimr, the scales would definitely tilt in their favor.

"Shall we invade them? Return the favor of their pillaging?"

"You say it so easily, but they've left twenty thousand in Glaðsheimr. Given the three Arms and Armor Clans are watching as well, we can't—Oh, wait."

It seemed something had occurred to Nobunaga in mid-sentence, and he fell silent, rubbing his chin in thought. After a long moment of pondering, he nodded firmly.

"Have you formulated a plan, My Lord?"

"That I have."

At Ran's question, Nobunaga slapped his knee and grinned like a scheming boy.

"Yes. Haste makes waste in any situation!"

"Oh. So the Steel Clan has made its move."

The news reached the ear of the Silk Clan's Prymr Utgarda seven days after the Flame Clan's Nobunaga. This was an age where information was still communicated via foot messenger or rider. There was no helping the fact that geography determined how long it took for news to get there.

"Yes. According to our spies, the Steel Clan Army numbers twenty thousand. Given we are fighting on our own territory, it would seem our victory is secure."

“Mm, indeed.”

Utgarda nodded magnanimously as she listened to the analysis being provided to her by the man serving as both her Second and Vizier. She had already accounted for the fact that the Steel Clan would invade the moment she conquered the Tiger Clan. She had also already determined the best locations to face the Steel Clan.

“However, it appears that Suoh-Yuuto is leading the army in person. He is a tactician reputed to be a manifestation of a war god. Of course, he is nothing next to you, Your Majesty, but it is best to be prepared.”

“No, there is nothing to worry about.”

Utgarda had heard numerous rumors about Yuuto. It appeared that, though inferior to her, he had a fair amount of skill in war. The Silk Clan could find themselves struggling somewhat. Still, she was confident in her victory.

“After all, Our Silk Clan have the ultimate and greatest secret weapon.”

Utgarda gazed down at the “weapon” her throne was seated upon. She had realized that it would be a powerful weapon five years ago, well before she had even undergone her rite of passage. No one had listened to her at the time, dismissing it as a child’s fancy. They had all said it was impossible, but she had made her closest subordinates continue their efforts, and those efforts had recently borne fruit.

She had originally planned to unveil it in her war with the Tiger Clan, but that had gone so smoothly and quickly that she had missed her opportunity to use it. That said, Utgarda now considered that lack of opportunity to have worked in her favor.

It was something that had taken five years to develop. She was quite attached to it. She wanted it to have a glorious debut.

And now, she’d found the perfect moment to test her new weapon: a battle against an army led by Suoh-Yuuto, a manifestation of a god of war.

ACT 4

“A narrow path surrounded by mountains, huh? Easy terrain to defend and hard terrain to attack.”

Yuuto furrowed his brow as he looked to the mountains that towered to either side.

Ten days after departing eastward from the Holy Capital of Glaðsheimr, the Steel Clan Army was resting along the border that separated the Shield and Tiger Clans. It went without saying that borders weren't clearly defined in this era, with the territory between two clans being only vaguely considered to belong to one or the other. Most often what ended up dividing territory between two clans were natural dividers such as mountains, rivers, and fortresses—objects that made crossing into the other territory difficult.

“Certainly, it is as you say, Your Majesty. There were several times we'd mobilized against the Shield Clan, but on most of those occasions we ended up just facing off in this spot, resulting in nothing more than a stalemate as we glared across at one another.”

Summoned to the command area by Yuuto, a compact man answered him as he knelt on one knee. The man's name was Scirvir. He was the messenger that the Tiger Clan had sent to seek aid from the Steel Clan. They had fortuitously encountered him on their advance. He was shocked to learn that the Tiger Clan's capital had already fallen, but driven by a desire for revenge, he had pleaded that his knowledge of the Tiger Clan's territory would make him useful and had asked to accompany Yuuto.

“Yes, it's easy to imagine why that would happen. The moment you get through the bottleneck, the enemy would be waiting to crush you on the other side.”

Scirvir nodded in agreement.

“That is the case, as you so wisely observe, Your Majesty.”

In large-scale combat, the side that could surround their opponent had an overwhelming advantage. It was no exaggeration to say that the party that managed to do so would almost certainly win the battle.

Since it was clear that the enemy had to use the narrow pass to advance into their territory, a faintly clever commander would know, even with Yggdrasil's bronze-age knowledge, that all they'd need to do was to divide their army into two flanks and surround the enemy force as they emerged from the exit. With all that in mind, they'd quickly realize how foolish it would be to press through such a pass.

"It's possible they're not aware of this terrain since they just conquered this area, but no shame in double-checking before we go. Kris!"

"I've already sent someone to look. I believe they'll return shortly."

"You're on top of everything as usual."

Yuuto's lips quirked into a grin at Kris's ready answer.

"Mother, Your Majesty, I apologize for keeping you waiting."

Soon after, a black-garbed man appeared in the staging area. His physique wasn't that of a warrior. He was slender and willowy, a body type that emphasized agility, and he very much fit the mold of one of Kristina's children. He was a man practically built for gathering information.

"Welcome back. Your report?"

"I found a force that appeared to be the Silk Clan's army a short distance from the exit of this pass. The force totaled perhaps ten to twelve thousand."

"Tch. As expected."

Yuuto clicked his tongue sourly.

Given the enemy's force was substantially smaller than previous reports had claimed, there was a high probability that they had several thousand troops lying in wait on either side, ready to flank them as they passed through. It would be far too dangerous to charge in without a plan.

"It would have been nice if we could have brought the wagon forts."

He had already proven at the Battle of Vígríðr that a barricade made up of iron-armored wagons could withstand a flanking attack from an enemy force. However, because he had expected a long journey to the eastern coast of Jötunheimr during this campaign, it would have been difficult to bring those heavy wagons along with them. On top of that, they were also extremely useful as cover against the Flame Clan's arquebuses, so, in the best interests of the defending force he had left back in the Holy Capital, he had no choice but to leave them behind.

"I'd like to know more detailed information about the terrain around here. Kris, can you take a look around and snap some pictures of the area?"

"Yes, of course."

Kristina gestured to the black-garbed man with her chin, prompting the man to produce an object that had no business existing in this age. It was a digital camera with a telescopic lens that Yuuto had brought with him from the modern era. Checking the contents, Yuuto saw several pictures of a valley surrounded by mountains that appeared to have been taken from a high elevation.

"Damn, you really do work quickly!"

"I could hardly be considered first-rate if I only took action after being told to do so. It takes a first-rate individual to anticipate and finish the task before it's given," Kristina returned flatly with a cool expression.

Yuuto couldn't help but admire her. Considering that she was fifteen by Yggdrasil's reckoning, and only fourteen by modern methods of counting ages, she was a terrifyingly capable young woman.

"They've stopped, mm? If they'd just charged in, We could have destroyed them."

On the other side of the mountain pass, the Silk Clan Prymr Utgarda, like Yuuto, clicked her tongue in irritation. She had already assigned five thousand troops to take up positions in the mountains on either side of the pass, and she had been prepared to annihilate the Steel Clan Army if they had just blundered into the valley. However, annoyed though she may have been, Utgarda soon

twisted her lips into an amused smile.

“Heh. Very well, then. It would be disappointing if We had so easily dealt with the infamous ‘god of war,’ after all.”

Utgarda had made numerous preparations in anticipation of this day. She also had her superb new invention. It would have been anticlimactic if it all ended before she could unveil her grand machinations.

“The normal thing to do here would be to wait to see how the enemy moves, but that’s a bit too dull.”

Utgarda debated with herself as she fanned herself with a fan made of bird feathers. She hated boredom above all else. She had no intention of just sitting here in this wasteland for several days waiting for the enemy to make a move.

“Mm, well then. It’s a good time to make use of *them*.”

After a brief moment of thought, Utgarda nodded to herself.

It was natural for someone to want to play with their newly acquired toys. If her new toys worked out well, it could end this whole matter with immediate effect. The shorter her boredom, the better.

“Time to see what this so-called war god has to offer!”

“You all ready?” Pjazi asked, turning to face the soldiers behind him.

He had once been the Leader of Subordinates of the Tiger Clan, a warrior noted for his strength and ardor, but there was no sign of that man in him now. Pjazi’s face was gaunt, and his skin deathly pale. There was no light in his eyes—no life behind his gaze. He exuded the aura of a defeated and broken man.

The soldiers following him didn’t bother to answer him, staring at him with a cold look of hatred. But that, too, was only natural. They were soldiers that had once belonged to the Tiger Clan, the clan that Pjazi had brought down with his betrayal.

They were only here because they had no choice. They were slave soldiers that fought for the Silk Clan because Utgarda had taken their wives and children as hostages. It was completely understandable that they’d loathe Pjazi—he was

the root cause of all of their misery.

“Her Majesty the Prymr has commanded that we fight. We will now charge at the Steel Clan Army in front of us.”

Again, none of them bothered to answer.

There were probably others who could have led this unit. Pjazi knew Utgarda took sadistic glee in forcing him to lead these men. He couldn't get the sound of the gleeful giggles that spilled from Utgarda's lips when she had executed the leadership of the Tiger Clan out of his head. Pjazi felt a jet of red-hot anger in the pit of his stomach as he imagined her amused laughter at his predicament.

Maybe I should just charge her army with these men.

He couldn't help but imagine how satisfying that would be.

However, there was simply too large a difference in numbers. The only outcome of that little act of rebellion would be that he and his men would be instantly crushed by the main body of the Silk Clan Army. Soon after, Utgarda would just slaughter every last Tiger Clan civilian she held hostage. There was no way that these soldiers would trust the lives of their families to a traitor like Pjazi, and it was far too late for him to redeem himself in their eyes. No doubt she had that in mind when she put him in charge of this unit.

“Damned viper.”

The memory of being swayed by the charms of such a terrible woman made him want to curse his past self for his foolish decisions. If he could turn back time, he would definitely correct that mistake, but reality didn't allow for second chances. The only thing Pjazi could do now was to lead a suicidal charge against the Steel Clan in the hope that a brave death in battle would save the civilians that were being held hostage. He didn't think that would come anywhere close to atoning for his sins, but there was no other choice left to him.

Claang! Claang! Claang!

Yuuto jumped out of bed upon hearing the clamorous echo of gongs that indicated an enemy attack. Felicia, who had been sleeping naked next to him,

also hopped out of bed and took a glance around the room.

There was no helping the excitement that came from one's survival instincts kicking into high gear on the battlefield. It was simply human nature. That said, there was nothing to be gained by a general being in a constant state of nervous excitement. All it resulted in was rash judgments and intense feelings of anxiety. To maintain the level head needed to make calm and clear decisions, there was a need to bask in the warmth of another's touch. Or so that was Yuuto's excuse, at least.

"Father! Enemies coming from the front! They're charging right at us!"

"Tch! I didn't expect them to attack two days into the face-off."

Yuuto calmly responded to Kristina's report as he got dressed.

Leaving his tent, he saw that the sky was a dimly lit shade of blue. The sun was still hidden behind the eastern mountain, with just enough light spilling around the summit to know it was there. Given that Yuuto had expected the day to pass with the two armies testing the other's reaction, it was somewhat unexpected to deal with an enemy attack so early. It was unexpected, but an important part of battlefield tactics involved catching the enemy unaware. Attacking at night or early morning was one of the most basic types of sneak attacks. Although young, Yuuto now had enough battlefield experience to remain calm even under these circumstances.

"Messenger!"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Upon hearing Yuuto's summons, a mounted cavalry trooper immediately approached.

"Deliver a message to each unit. Prepare for battle! There's no reason to rush, but make sure that they rouse their soldiers and encourage them even as they keep them calm! Order the arbalests to open fire on the enemy as soon as they're ready!"

Yuuto issued orders with a calm assurance. The commander's mindset also influenced how those under him reacted. As they received Yuuto's calm, precise orders, the soldiers who had been panicked by the sudden sneak attack all

began to calm down.

“Fire!”

At the frontline commander’s order, countless arrows rained down upon the attacking Silk Clan forces. One after another, the soldiers at the front of their formation collapsed, but the enemy continued their advance. They let out a loud cry, holding their spears at the ready as they charged. As he listened to their battle cry, Yuuto furrowed his brow in thought.

“...There’s a note of despair in their cries.”

“Despair?”

“Yes, this is odd.”

Typically, soldiers on the battlefield carried a great deal of anxiety, fear, and a desire for life in their hearts. They would put a lid on those feelings through optimism that they could win, or through their resolve to defeat the enemy they faced. The moment they knew they couldn’t win a battle, that lid came off, often as a result of their fear, and they would flee out of a desire to survive.

There was a feeling of despair emanating from these men, however. It was despair brought about by the knowledge that they couldn’t run. They had no choice but to fight—their only option was to win. They had the air of soldiers who *had* to fight to the death.

“Hm... I can see that they’re all quite motivated, but honestly, I can’t hear what you hear in their voices, Big Brother...”

“Neither can I. Are you sure it’s not your imagination?”

“Huh?! You can’t?”

Yuuto reacted with shock as Felicia and Kristina tilted their heads quizzically at his observation. To him, the tone of despair in the enemy’s voices was clear as day.

“Mm, yes, I can see there’s a mixture of dim blue and a blackish-red mixed in with their emotions.”

The man who appeared after making that observation was Hveðrungr, the

masked man. For this campaign, he was participating as the provost in charge of punishing those who broke military discipline, as well as filling in as a staff officer.

“B-Big Brother!”

“Big Sister... How many times must I tell you I’m your little brother?”

Hveðrungr shrugged his shoulders with a dry laugh.

“Y-Yes, of course.”

Felicia hurriedly recomposed herself. Hveðrungr’s true identity—that he was Loptr, former Second of the Wolf Clan—was a secret that had to be concealed at all costs.

Felicia cleared her throat.

“So, Hveðrungr, what are you referring to? The dim blue and the blackish-red, what do those mean?”

“What do they mean, you ask? I can only say that’s what it looks like. Well, to put it into other words, the black shade to their red means they’re not going to be easily swayed to another’s influence.”

“You’re making even less sense than you were before.”

“The dim blue refers to sadness or despair. The blackish red is rage and hatred, I think?”

“Mm, yes, that’s what it feels like,” Hveðrungr said as he nodded his agreement with Yuuto’s explanation.

“...I’m surprised you were able to understand such nebulously emotional terms,” Kristina said with a clear look of distaste. As a pragmatist, she didn’t particularly like that sort of ambiguity.

“Mm? I was just describing what I felt.”

“Could that be an ability imparted by the twin runes given to you by Lady Sigrdrífa?” Kristina asked, gazing intently at Yuuto.

Yuuto shrugged with a dry laugh.

“It’s nothing like that. Listen, can’t you hear a person’s emotions in their

tone?”

“Well, yes, at least vaguely. Like when they’re angry or sad.”

“That’s what it is. I saw a lot before I became patriarch. I’ve been really careful to observe people’s emotions. I guess that experience makes it a little easier for me to pick out those emotions in people’s voices,” Yuuto said with a dismissive laugh, but it wasn’t as simple as he made it seem.

Desperate situations often sharply increased a person’s abilities. Even though Yuuto himself was hardly aware of it, the fact that he had interacted with many people and carefully observed their feelings and reactions meant that he had unknowingly accumulated a great deal of experience in that particular skill, creating an enormous database of knowledge in his brain.

“See, when people try to hide their emotions, they do a pretty good job of masking their expressions, but they’re not always able to do the same with their voices. I can tell when they’re trying to disguise their feelings with their tone. It’s a useful thing to be able to do when negotiating.”

“I see. I’ll try to pay closer attention in the future, in that case.”

“Yep, good idea. It’s a good way to tell whether someone’s telling the truth or lying.”

Yuuto’s lips twisted up into a confident smile. He had constantly been paying attention to the emotions people expressed in their voices. He couldn’t see people’s emotions through innate talent like Hveðrungr. However, the experience that he had accumulated through hard work could, with enough effort, work better than any innate talent.

Innate talent often relies on intuition. For many people, intuition often results in minor mistakes. People who can intuitively do things, because they’re used to successfully doing something, don’t tend to realize that they’re making those mistakes, and since they can intuitively do something, they don’t think too deeply about what they’re doing or how to do it better. Because of that, those with innate talents often stop short of their true potential once they’ve passed a certain point.

Because Yuuto’s ability was built upon countless hours of repetition and

accumulated experience, it was more precise than Hveðrungr's innate ability, and the vast database of knowledge he'd built up allowed him to more precisely read an opponent's emotions.

"Enemy approaching! The arbalest units have completed their deployment to the wings."

"That said, this isn't the time to be worrying about the enemy's feelings."

Upon hearing the messenger's report, Yuuto's smile turned self-deprecating. A commander needed to have all sorts of sensors deployed on the battlefield to pick up any useful bit of information. The fact that he'd been caught off guard by Nobunaga's secondary force at the Battle of Glaðsheimr was still fresh on his mind. He had sworn to himself that he wouldn't ignore even the faintest of hunches that something was off ever again.

At the moment, however, he was required to make his decisions quickly.

Yuuto swept his arm forward.

"Phalanxes, charge!"

"Gah!"

"M-My shield shattere— Ah?!"

"Guh!"

"Ngh!"

"Aeri...th... I'm sorry..."

One by one, the Tiger Clan's slave soldiers fell.

The Steel Clan's attack could only be described as overwhelming. Their arrows had incredible power behind them, and because they were tipped with iron arrowheads, they easily punched through the men's wooden shields and leather armor. If a Tiger Clan soldier somehow managed to avoid those arrows and make it close enough to the Steel Clan forces, they then found themselves faced with a forest of impossibly long spear points bearing down upon them. The spears also had iron points, so the Tiger Clan soldiers' shields were easily pierced and shattered, leaving the soldiers without a defense. Even once they

forced their way past the dense array of spears and got into their melee range, their spears and swords quickly shattered against the enemy's shields.

"What exactly are we supposed to do against this?!"

Despair had drained all the color from Pjazi's face.

Although the Tiger Clan soldiers were fighting with an unshakable resolve—since they were fighting desperately for the sake of their families that were being held hostage—they had yet to take down a single enemy of their own. This battle was a one-sided massacre. Perhaps if their equipment was made of iron like the Silk Clan's line soldiers, they might have had some way of putting up a fight, but of course, such precious weapons weren't given to soldiers from freshly conquered territory. After all, there was no way to guarantee their loyalty.

"Grr... If things stay this way, then...!"

Pjazi's expression tensed as the panic welled up in his chest. His forces were holding for the moment with sheer force of will, but that wasn't going to last much longer. The enemy's sheer dominance would soon force them to break. Once the enemy controlled the momentum of the battle, it wouldn't matter how hard his individual soldiers fought—they wouldn't be able to change the outcome.

"I'm the only one who can turn this tide!"

Pjazi drew his sword and waded into the Steel Clan's front line. He turned his body to the side to avoid the hail of spear points reaching out for him and slid his body between the spears. Next, he struck with the sword in his hand, taking off the head of the soldier in front of him. Even with his reputation in ruins, he was still a highly-skilled fighter, a man who had been one of the most powerful Einherjar in the Tiger Clan.

"Yah!"

The soldier in the row behind immediately readied his spear and thrust it at Pjazi. He tried to dodge the spear point by leaping to the side, but the haft of the spear of the soldier to his side blocked his way.

"Tch!"

Though Pjazi was able to somehow block the attack with his spear, another Steel Clan soldier immediately followed up with a thrust of his own.

“Mrrph!”

Pjazi twisted his body to avoid the attack, but that was as far as he got.

“Grah!”

Realizing that he was stuck between two spears and unable to move, Pjazi began to panic. He tried to push the spears away from him through brute force, but the spear he tried to move was held in place by a second spear. Even an Einherjar had no way of responding to this situation. Aware that Pjazi was held in place by the entwined spears, the first soldier drew back his spear and thrust the point at him.

“Guh!”

With no way of avoiding the attack, the spear point punched into Pjazi’s flank. Blood sprayed out of the wound as the soldier withdrew the spear.

“Ugh... So this is the end...”

He fell to his knees before collapsing onto his face. With the loss of their commander, the Tiger Clan forces lost their cohesion. The resolve that they had maintained in their desperation was overwhelmed by the sheer despair of learning that they were completely outmatched. There were plenty among the ranks who, in their panic, chose their own lives over the lives of their families. One soldier fled, then another. With each soldier who threw down his arms and ran, the Steel Clan Army’s momentum grew until the tide had turned completely against the Tiger Clan forces.

“Big Brother, it appears the matter is settled! The enemy fought hard, but the momentum is ours! I believe the day is ours!”

“Yeah...”

Yuuto nodded skeptically at Felicia’s excited report.

True, there was something remarkable about the enemy’s resolve—they had an intensity that he could almost physically feel. These enemies had put up a

better fight against the phalanxes than anyone they'd faced in the past. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. As his forces pushed back the enemy and advanced, he glanced over to one of the fallen enemy soldiers that he saw out of the corner of his eye. It was a sight he'd seen often in the last four years. And it was the realization that it was a familiar sight that triggered his epiphany.

"Ah! All units, halt immediately! It's a trap! Stop! STOP!"

Yuuto hurriedly yelled out to his forces.

However, it wasn't an easy matter to stop such a large mass of soldiers, especially when they were excited by their impending victory and were pushing forward to monopolize on it.

He had sent out mounted messengers several times, warning of harsh consequences if his orders weren't followed, but it was only when they were about to step into the narrow pass that the Steel Clan Army's advance finally stopped.

"Phew... Just in time."

Yuuto wiped the sweat that had beaded on his brow with his arm.

"Big Brother, why did you think this was a trap? It didn't look like they were trying to draw us out."

With calm restored, Felicia took the opportunity to ask Yuuto why he had made the call he did.

"Yeah, it didn't initially look like it... But these men were definitely sacrificial lambs meant to lure us out. Although the Silk Clan knows how to smelt iron, all of these soldiers were equipped with bronze weapons, and their armor and shields weren't made of iron either. That's not even mentioning the weird intensity of their resolve. They were probably Tiger Clan soldiers who were sent out after the Silk Clan took their families hostage."

"I see. It certainly is a fairly typical strategy to send out the soldiers of a captured territory first."

"Yeah. Their plan was probably to throw away this force by sending it against

us, then ambush us with the main body of the Silk Clan Army when we pursued the broken force through the pass.”

“Ah! That’s exactly the same as the Fisher and Bandit strategy you used to draw out the Dólgprásir, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, precisely. And clearly, the enemy understands how it’s supposed to work.”

The Fisher and Bandit Strategy involved drawing the enemy into an encirclement ambush after an initial clash with the enemy. What made the tactic difficult to execute was drawing out the enemy’s forces after the initial clash. A quick retreat made it obvious to the enemy that it was a trap meant to draw them out.

The key to successfully executing the tactic was making sure that the initial clash was intense enough to make the enemy believe that they were winning. However, that required engaging in a hard-fought, close-quarters battle with the enemy. The retreating forces would be physically tired, and, given how close they were to the enemy, it would be difficult for them to avoid the enemy’s pursuit.

As a solution to that problem, the Silk Clan had chosen to take a conquered army’s families hostage and conduct a suicide charge against their enemy. What made this tactic particularly effective was that the loss of those soldiers didn’t cost the Silk Clan anything. It was cruel, but Yuuto had to admit it was effective.

If Yuuto himself hadn’t noticed the small irregularities in the enemy army, or if he didn’t have previous knowledge of the Fisher and Bandit Strategy, he might very well have fallen into Utgarda’s trap.

“She’s pretty damned smart. Not only that, she’s clever and ruthless. She might turn out to be more difficult to deal with than even Bára or Brother Rungr.”

Yuuto couldn’t help but swallow the lump that had formed in his throat at the appearance of an unexpectedly challenging opponent.

Swish! Smack! Fwip! Crack!

“Gah!”

“Urgh!”

The whip cut through the air and lashed at the men’s backs. The sharp blows tore through their clothing and left painful red welts on their backs.

“Tsk. You cretins had the nerve to come running back here?”

As Utgarda cracked the whip with both hands, her lips slowly warped into an amused smile. Her actions made the men under her whip tremble. Were it simply the lash of the whip, they could have handled the pain. However, the combination of the intense pain inflicted by the whip and Utgarda’s demonstration of power and sadistic glee was too much to bear. They could only think about avoiding the agonizing lashes.

“P-Please forgive us, Your Majesty! W-We won’t ever run again!”

“Silence! The words of cowards who’ve already fled once are worthless!”

Swish! Crack!

“Gaaaah! Urgh... Ahhhh!”

As a particularly nasty lash landed upon a man, he screamed like a child. No one present thought that he was overreacting to the mere lash of a whip. The lashes delivered by a whip hurt much more than they appeared to. In the hands of a skilled wielder, the pain inflicted by a whip could easily kill its victim.

As would be expected, Utgarda wasn’t one to hold back in her lashes. She continued to crack her whip without pause.

“Phew. That was good exercise.”

Once she had inflicted enough pain on the men and enjoyed their expressions of suffering, Utgarda sat down in her chair to catch her breath. Sweat faintly beaded on her brow.

“Th-Thank the gods...”

The men had relaxed, relieved that their torment was over. They had been subjected to constant lashes by a powerful Einherjar. Their relief was understandable.

“Vizier. Find their families—all of them, including their kin—and execute them.”

“Wha?!”

That feeling of relief was short-lived. The color quickly drained from the men’s faces.

“Heh. The most entertaining expression of despair only comes when they’re thrown further into despair at the very moment they think they’ve been spared.”

The reaction of the men fulfilled her expectations, and Utgarda’s lips twisted into an evil grin. By contrast, the Silk Clan generals turned their faces away, unable to bear the sight. They couldn’t dismiss it as someone else’s problem. After all, it could very well be them in that position tomorrow. That said, the reality was that Utgarda’s unrelenting punishment of anyone who disobeyed her laid the foundation for the immense loyalty her subjects showed her. It also made sure they followed her orders to the letter.

“Well, that helped relieve some stress.”

Utgarda tossed her whip to her vizier and composed her expression.

The plan had worked almost exactly as Utgarda had intended for it to. The Tiger Clan soldiers had fought like demons but lost, and the Steel Clan Army had almost ridden their high and pursued them through the pass. However, the moment they had entered the pass, the Steel Clan Army had stopped in their tracks and returned to their original location. It appeared they had read her intentions.

“Still, even if they knew what We had intended to do, it shouldn’t have been that easy to stop their soldiers from advancing.”

Utgarda believed that battle was much like drinking. The longer a particular session lasted, the more drunk one got, and the more their judgment suffered as a result.

Commanders were one matter, but soldiers were easy enough to manipulate. Once drunk on the sweet taste of victory, they often left the control of their leaders and went berserk. Even if a commander saw through the trap, the

soldiers under them wouldn't stop as ordered and would fall victim to the resulting encirclement and die. That had been her plan, and it was an unexpected disappointment that the Steel Clan Army had stopped so quickly.

"Hrmph. Suppose that's why he's considered a god of war. He's got his dogs well trained."

"Based on what we're hearing, it seems she's quite a dangerous opponent... In more ways than one."

Yuuto tiredly let out a dry laugh.

The sun had already set in the western sky, and the area had started to grow darker. They had just finished interrogating the Tiger Clan soldiers they had captured in the morning's battle. Of course, they hadn't used torture of any sort. The prisoners had enthusiastically provided information, even information they hadn't asked for, and they had even begged Yuuto to avenge them in the end. It seemed they had quite a bit of pent-up anger and hatred.

"Yes... In a way, she's a mirror to you, Big Brother."

Felicia frowned sympathetically as she learned of the Silk Clan patriarch Utgarda's depredations. Of course, this was Yggdrasil, a land where only the strong survived. Sometimes it was necessary to take extreme actions to show one's ruthlessness. Still, the fact that Utgarda appeared to take joy in her abuses made her a particularly twisted example of a patriarch.

"It was painful to listen to their stories, but I feel relief when I see your face, Big Brother. We're blessed to have the chalice of a kind man like you."

Felicia placed her hands upon her bountiful bosom and let out a breath of relief. Although he'd enjoyed their bounty countless times, Yuuto's eyes couldn't help but be drawn to her chest. Noticing his gaze, Felicia chuckled.

"Shall you enjoy them again tonight? I came up with a new technique that I wanted to try..."

"I've returned."

"Eep!"

Kristina appeared suddenly behind Felicia as she was directing a suggestive gaze to Yuuto. Caught completely off guard, Felicia let out a soft yelp.



It was impressive that Felicia, both an Einherjar and Yuuto's personal bodyguard, couldn't notice her approaching.

It had been two years since Kristina had begun her service under Yuuto, and, in addition to plentiful experience, she was young enough that she was still growing into her skills. There was a sense that she was starting to master the art of concealment.

"Ah, welcome back, Kris. How was it?"

By contrast, for Yuuto, it was completely typical for him to not notice Kristina's approach. Well used to the occurrence, Yuuto casually called over to her.

He had sent her to check in on the enemy's state of affairs. To make one's way into enemy territory when there was only a limited number of ways in, check in on their forces, and return safely was, to put it simply, an incredibly difficult feat. Although the Steel Clan had many talented individuals, the only ones who could accomplish such a feat were probably Kristina—with her rune of Veðrfölnir, Silencer of Winds—and her older sister Albertina. It was for that reason that he had sent her personally on this particular reconnaissance mission, even though her usual duty was to manage the various spies and scouts who served in the Steel Clan's army.

"It was as you said, Father. The only ones who attacked us were Tiger Clan soldiers. The main body of the Silk Clan Army was twiddling its thumbs in the valley at the other end of the mountain pass."

With her report delivered successfully, Kristina took a spoonful of vegetables from the bowl in her hand and blew cool air upon them. It appeared that she had picked up her dinner on her way back. Given how much she had moved around, it was understandable that she'd be hungry. It was a pretty impertinent attitude to take in front of the þjóðann, but that was just business as usual. Yuuto had much more important matters he wanted to deal with.

"As expected," Yuuto murmured, his expression tense.

Had Yuuto not issued his order to halt, the Steel Clan Army would have taken heavy losses. One misjudgment could have had an enormous impact on the

battle. The fate of the twenty thousand members of the Steel Clan Army, and beyond that, the very future of the Steel Clan, rested upon the outcome of this war. There was a lot of pressure on Yuuto.

“Also... Here, and here. These locations had Silk Clan forces lying in wait, just as you had indicated, Father. There were about five thousand soldiers at each location,” Kristina explained as she operated the digital camera with a practiced hand, showing pictures of the enemy units, along with shots that made clear where exactly they were.

“That’s as expected, I guess. Yeah, that’s the natural thing to do.”

The soldiers had been stationed in the mountains to either side, located a short distance away from the main body of the Steel Clan Army.

Mountains were a bothersome presence on a battlefield. When attacking them, the attacking army had to march uphill, slowing their momentum, while the defenders had the advantage of the high ground and had extra momentum when charging downhill. It would be disastrous to have the Silk Clan’s reserves charge into the Steel Clan’s flanks just as the Steel Clan was engaging the main body of the Silk Clan Army.

“If we charge headfirst through this pass, we’ll be pounded on three sides. What to do, what to do...”

Yuuto rubbed his chin, his brow furrowed in thought.

“Shall we have Rún fish them out?”

“While I’d like nothing more than to do that, the terrain makes that impossible.”

At Felicia’s suggestion, Yuuto shook his head with a bitter laugh.

It was true that the Múspell Unit’s favored tactic of the Parthian Shot was well suited for drawing out the enemy. But given that there was some distance between the end of the pass and the main body of the enemy army, an attack might very well lead to another enemy unit cutting off the Múspell Unit’s path of retreat. On top of that, the opposing commander was sharp. It was almost certain that they’d take the appropriate steps to cut off any retreat.

“Mm, ah, wait, there’s *that* isn’t there?”

“Eep?! B-Big Brother?!”

Yuuto suddenly brushed his fingers against the nape of Felicia’s neck, prompting a surprised squeak from her. He then brushed his fingers through her golden tresses and grinned.

“I’ve figured it out. We’re going on the offensive next.”

ACT 5

“How dull.”

Utgarda rested her cheek against her hand. A bored sigh escaped her lips.

Her army had already been locked in a staring contest with the Steel Clan Army for an entire fortnight now. She had passed the first few days of the standoff by torturing the remaining members of the Tiger Clan Army, but she quickly tired of that diversion.

For Utgarda, the days since had been a battle against boredom. It was a living hell for her. The only reason she had chosen not to act despite her intense boredom was because she understood that making a move would result in disastrous losses to her forces. Although Utgarda was well known for her impulsiveness and short temper, she was capable of restraining herself when the occasion called for it.

“We would have expected them to respond by now...”

She looked intently in the Steel Clan Army’s direction.

Boredom was the thing she hated more than anything in the world. Of course, she had already taken steps of her own to try to change the situation.

“But not a peep from them. We would have figured the insults to the þjóðann would have had the desired effect.”

Utgarda raised her hands to the sky in exasperation, sighing with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Perhaps it was too obvious.”

Of course, Utgarda herself knew that her scheme was unlikely to succeed, but she had hoped that even if she couldn’t get the officers to move, she might at least have gotten some rank and file soldiers to take the bait.

Utgarda believed that information was, at times, more precious than rare jewels, which was why her information-gathering techniques were incredibly

thorough—both inside and outside of her territory.

Suoh-Yuuto, the þjóðann, was well known for being a benevolent ruler. He was a man who went to great lengths to increase the standard of living for his people, and he was extremely popular among his subjects. Many among them practically worshiped him.

A constant stream of insults and disrespect leveled at the þjóðann, while perhaps ineffective at forcing the þjóðann himself to respond, would enrage some of those under his command and force them into a rash offensive. Yet, despite her efforts, there was no sign of any response even after two weeks of constant abuse. It seemed this scheme wasn't going to work. Suoh-Yuuto had trained his dogs well.

“Then, time for another—”

“A report to Her Majesty...”

As she began to think up alternatives, a soldier breathlessly entered her tent. While Utgarda felt a flash of irritation at having a mere soldier interrupt her thoughts, curiosity and her self-control as a general won out over that ire.

“What is it?”

“The Steel Clan Army has started advancing in our direction.”

“Oh?”

Utgarda's lips twisted into a sadistic smile. It seemed they'd finally taken the bait. She supposed that Suoh-Yuuto had been unable to restrain the anger of those serving under him any longer.

“How hard it must be to be a king beloved by all. That love ultimately becomes a curse...” Utgarda said with a look of pity.

Of course, it was all an act. Internally, she was ecstatic.

“Not yet. It's still too early.”

She had long been hoping for this moment to arrive. Overwhelmed by the urge to order her entire army to charge, Utgarda tightly gripped her knee and fought back the orders that almost spilled from her lips. The Steel Clan would escape if she attacked now.

She needed to wait.

Wait and draw the enemy closer.

“Hurry... Hurry already.”

Like an asp waiting for her prey to approach, Utgarda held out patiently for the right moment.

Fwoosh! Whoosh! Fwip!

“They’re here!”

Countless arrows rained down from the enemy’s lines. The screech of the arrows cutting through the air announced that the battle had begun.

“Yes, now! All forces charge! Crush the enemy!”

Utgarda stood up and shouted her orders, pointing her whip at the enemy. The initial skirmish had come to an end. Utgarda’s orders signaled the start of the real clash between the two armies.

“Ngh...”

Several minutes after the battle had started, Utgarda chewed on her thumbnail in frustration. It wasn’t a particularly dignified action for a self-proclaimed “empress” to take, but there was no one in the Silk Clan who could chastise her for her lack of grace.

“Blast it! What is that doddering fool Rhyton doing?!” She shouted, throwing a tantrum.

Rhyton was a Silk Clan general who was considered to be one of its greatest. She had honored him with command of her front-line troops because of the reputation he had garnered, but despite that, the Silk Clan Army was being pushed back on all fronts.

Even though she had ordered her forces to charge, the Steel Clan Army had easily blunted their momentum, further compounding Utgarda’s irritation.

“Pitiful. Why are all of Our children so incompetent?”

Unable to contain her anger any longer, she lashed her whip repeatedly at the

ground below. The retainers who had been nearby all fell silent, trembling in terror. They understood that if they said something now, they were likely to draw the brunt of her anger and be tortured for their trouble. All they could do was batten down the hatches until the storm had passed. It was best to let sleeping dogs lie. Unfortunately for Utgarda's subordinates, the Prymr was a rabid dog, capable of biting anyone at any moment. Even when left alone, she would lash out in anger.

"Why are you silent?! Of what use are those heads and mouths of yours?! At least be useful for once and provide a solution to this problem!"

Fwip! Her whip lashed through the air and struck a retainer in the face as she raised her voice in irritation. She was unconcerned with who her lashes landed upon, so long as she had an outlet for her anger. The one struck by her lash could only curse his misfortune.

"B-Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, if I may speak up. Our reinforcements on the right and left flanks should soon appear. Once they do, we should be able to start turning the tide of the battle."

"We are already well aware of that!"

Fwoosh! Crack!

With a shout of anger, Utgarda cracked her whip against the one retainer who had mustered the courage to comment on the situation. At the same time, in her mind, she agreed with his observation. There was nothing fair about her behavior. However, she believed that, as someone who ruled over the masses, she couldn't afford to follow the recommendations of one of her followers so readily. It would harm her authority as a ruler. She needed to claim all of the credit for any accomplishments for herself. Otherwise, what was the point of leading the army in person?

"Hrmph. Fine."

Utgarda drew back her whip and coiled it, returning it to her hip as she sat back down, somewhat calmer than earlier. It seemed that she had been satisfied by being able to vent her anger at her subordinates. Once again, she felt that it was best to unleash her anger on others instead of letting it build up internally. It let her quickly and efficiently express her frustrations, after all. To

her, that was pretty much the only way for these incompetent buffoons to be of any use. Utgarda sincerely believed they should be grateful that she was making use of them at all as targets for her rage. Her arrogance knew no bounds, and it was her heartfelt belief that the heavens and earth were hers to command.

“...Mm. Those long spears are a nuisance,” Utgarda reluctantly admitted, a sour expression upon her features.

The Tiger Clan troops had described them to her previously, but her first impression was that such long spears were too long for precise handling and would be of no use in combat. They were even targets of her derisive laughter. In actual combat, however, they were extraordinarily troublesome weapons to deal with. When gathered in close formation, there was no way to break through the wall of spear points.

“As troublesome as they may be, it is well known that things of such extreme strength often have similarly extreme weaknesses—if you know how to find them.”

The length of the spears and the tight concentration of the formations they were used in likely made maneuvering extremely difficult. The spears were only useful because they were used in closely packed formations. Once the battle devolved into a close melee of individual soldier against individual soldier, there were few weapons as needlessly cumbersome as those long spears.

“Heh, fine, enjoy your advantage for now. It only makes it all the sweeter to see their despair when they go from the edge of victory to utter defeat once surrounded.”

Utgarda pictured that moment, and she chuckled with dark malice.

...

...

But no matter how long she waited, neither of her flanking units appeared on the battlefield.

“Blast it! What are those fools Logi and Huginn doing?!”

Utgarda once again let out a scream of frustration. She willed herself to

continue to wait, but the soldiers still didn't appear. There wasn't even the faintest sign of their presence. It was clear something had happened that she was gravely uninformed about.

“Oh damn, this isn't good! They've completely outflanked us!”

Logi couldn't hide his panic as his forces were suddenly attacked from behind. Logi was an Einherjar and the man reputed to be the greatest individual warrior in the Silk Clan. In particular, he was known for his ability to lead charges, which was why Utgarda had chosen him to lead the right wing of the Silk Clan Army. Even he couldn't have anticipated this sudden attack against his forces.

“Tch, where in the blazes did they come from?!”

Standing between the Steel Clan Army and the Silk Clan were the Prymheimr Mountains, one of the Three Great Mountain Ranges that made up the Roof of Yggdrasil. Even if it was summer and there wasn't any snow upon the mountains, foreign soldiers unfamiliar with the territory shouldn't have been able to cross them. The reality, however, was that the enemy was here, and they were attacking his forces. Logi couldn't understand what was happening.

Similarly, Huginn, placed in charge of the left wing of the Silk Clan Army, was caught completely flat-footed at the sudden, impossible attack by enemy forces. In contrast to Logi, Huginn wasn't known for his individual fighting abilities, but he was a man chosen to lead his unit because of his cunning. He was well known for being a flexible tactician who could adapt to whatever situation he found himself in. But even for him, this attack by the Steel Clan's forces could only be described as a bolt out of the blue.

“They've come over the Galdhøpiggen Mountains?! Impossible...”

The Galdhøpiggen Mountains were the mountain range that divided the Tiger and Shield Clans. It wasn't a place that a large army could pass over. Any army that tried should have been struck down by the wrath of the gods. But there was no point denying the reality of his situation.

“The magic tricks of Suoh-Yuuto, god of war, huh?”

His name was known even in the distant lands of Jötunheimr. He used strange

magics to make the impossible possible. The rumors even stated he wasn't a man, but a servant of the gods. Huginn the arch-realist and pragmatist wasn't one to believe such rumors; however, under these circumstances, magic was the only way to explain what had happened.

Several days before the battle, the Steel Clan Army's leadership had held a war council.

"Go over the mountains?!"

Upon hearing Yuuto's proposal, Felicia let out a cry of shock and turned to look at the mountains behind her. The Þrymheimr Mountains towered over them, stretching upward into the heavens. While Felicia was perhaps the most fervent of Yuuto's followers, even she felt climbing over those mountains would be a difficult task.

"Yeah. I came up with it looking at your choker made of álfkipfer," Yuuto said with deadly earnestness.

The word Álf—the sound that fairies make—came from the same root word as the name of the Alps, which had brought to mind Hannibal's crossing of the Alps, one of the most celebrated military accomplishments in ancient warfare.

"I was able to cross them, but I don't think ordinary soldiers can do the same," Kristina responded, a measure of doubt present in her voice. She followed up with a dry laugh.

Given that she had actually made the crossing herself, her words held a great deal of conviction.

"Well, yeah, we still need to determine if it's even possible. But, we shouldn't dismiss it as impossible before we try."

Brainstorming was an important method of resolving all kinds of issues. Many individuals and corporations had incorporated brainstorming sessions as a way of coming up with novel solutions to problems. The biggest characteristic of brainstorming sessions was to avoid concluding the feasibility of an idea when proposing it. That was because drawing preconceived conclusions restricted the number of potential ideas. The reality was that even ideas that appeared

impossible could actually be accomplished once they were proposed and investigated.

“The conditions are there to make it possible. First of all, we’re in the middle of summer.”

That meant that snow would only be present on the highest peaks. Even Yuuto had no intention of doing anything as difficult as sending his troops on a forced march through the snow. There was a good chance they could find paths that didn’t have any snow on them at this time of year.

“Secondly, many of the clans among our ranks, including the Wolf Clan, hail from mountainous areas.”

“...Oh, yes, that’s true.”

Felicia nodded in agreement after a moment’s thought.

The Claw, Ash, and Fang Clans were originally affiliated clans of the Wolf Clan, and all of them were based out of the Bifröst region, which was surrounded by the Three Great Mountain Ranges. There would be a fair number of soldiers among their ranks that had experience with working in mountainous terrain. As for the Mountain Dog Clan, their soldiers were born and bred mountain men who made their home in the northern Álfheimr region, from the base to the mid-mountain areas of the Himinbjörg Mountains. It was one of their strengths as an army, and it would be a shame not to make use of it.

“Thirdly, and this was the deciding factor for me, but there’s a hunter that made his home among those mountains among the prisoners we’d taken. It seems he’s got quite the grudge against the Silk Clan, and he’s volunteered to help guide our forces.”

“Hrm... It sounds like he’d know of relatively easy-to-pass areas and game trails,” Kristina said, her curiosity piqued.

The mountains of this region were almost completely untouched by man. It was a totally undeveloped region, and there were almost no paths worthy of the name. Since mountains and forests were extremely easy to get lost in and treacherous to travel, they often claimed the soldiers who tried to cross them. It was easy to imagine that an advance across such mountains would be much

easier with a guide who knew the area well.

“Finally, he knows how to deal with altitude sickness.”

“Altitude sickness...? That’s the headaches and nausea that comes with climbing too high into the mountains, yes?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

Yuuto pointed at Felicia when she made her observation. She was familiar with altitude sickness, having grown up near the Three Great Mountain Ranges.

“Our traditions tell us to avoid intruding upon the forbidden peaks of the mountains. The gods curse those who step into those areas. Even among the Wolf Clan, there’s at least one person that’s cursed by the gods every few years.”

“Ah, yeah, figured it’d be something like that.”

Yuuto chuckled, shoulders trembling as he held back a guffaw.

It was said that the ancient Greeks believed Mount Olympus to be the home of the gods and avoided climbing it because they believed the gods would punish mortals who stepped into their realm.

This was an age where the gods were a part of daily life. After all, there were even Einherjars who had been granted powers by the gods. It seemed as though the people of Yggdrasil held similar beliefs to the ancient Greeks.

“Then that’s what *they’ll* think of the mountains as well.”

Yuuto quirked his lips into a grin.

It may not bear repeating, but war required catching the opponent off guard. The more implausible the tactic, the likelier it was to catch the enemy off guard. That was a tough lesson that Yuuto had learned from his painful defeat at Nobunaga’s hand.

“This way, boss. It gets a bit steep here, can you handle it?”

“Hrmph. Not a problem.”

Fundinn, the patriarch of the Mountain Dog Clan and commander of the

Prymheimr Mountains division, bared his canines in a grin at the guide's question.

He wasn't bluffing. Despite climbing a steep trail, his footing was light, and he showed absolutely no sign of fatigue. That was the same for the Mountain Dog Clan soldiers following in his wake. Their ease in being in mountainous terrain was completely natural. The Mountain Dog Clan was a clan that lived in the mountains, rarely coming down to the lowlands. The only time they ever left their mountains was to sell wild herbs, medicinal plants, and the hides and meat of the animals they caught on the mountains. There was no reason that they'd find such a leisurely advance across the mountains taxing.

"We're fine, but we have members of the other clans with us. It's perhaps time to take a rest," Fundinn said with an exasperated shrug.

While he wanted to keep pressing forward, Yuuto had strictly ordered him to take it slowly, letting their bodies adapt to the altitude with frequent rest stops along the way. Yuuto had gone so far as to give the odd orders to hold in place and have Fundinn's men do some exercises along the way once they were more than halfway up the mountains. Fundinn was honestly perplexed by those orders, but they were the words of the great reginarch that had already accomplished countless magnificent feats. He had no intention of disregarding his orders.

"Heh, but this is a treat."

Although he had ordered the men to rest, Fundinn himself wasn't quite able to contain his excitement and had begun to whirl his arms in circles.

Fundinn had turned thirty-three this year. He was at his peak as a warrior, where his enthusiasm and physical abilities were still near their prime but were reinforced with the insights garnered through experience. He was also an Einherjar, and both his physical abilities and skills as a warrior were first-rate. However, while he had produced solid results in his battles up to this point, he had yet to accomplish anything of particular note as a warrior.

"Father's gone to the trouble of putting me in charge. I need to produce results worthy of his trust."

His voice was firm, and there was a great deal of conviction in his tone.

The Mountain Dog Clan was a small clan with perhaps two thousand members among their ranks. The only reason that he, as the patriarch of such a minuscule clan, was still considered part of the senior leadership of the Steel Clan—even though the Steel Clan now had multiple powerful clans among its ranks—was because he and his clan had been with the Steel Clan from the beginning. If he didn't prove himself here, there was the possibility he'd be demoted from the senior leadership to the subordinate ranks. That was more than a good enough reason for him to be so motivated.

“Sniff, sniff. Yup, this way. The enemy's getting closer.”

“Impressive sense of smell,” Kristina said with a mix of exasperation and admiration as Hildegard pointed the path forward with her nose.

While Kristina's tone wasn't as friendly as it was with Albertina and Ephelia, she still seemed more fond of Hildegard than she was of most others. When Yuuto had his audience with Nobunaga at Stórk, they had been dragged into a bit of trouble, and because they were close in age—not to mention that Hildegard was also a perfect target for Kristina's teasing—they'd grown a bit closer.



“Heh, this is easy peasy if we just follow their scent.”

“Like a dog, mm?”

“Not a dog! A wolf!”

As soon as she caught earshot of Kristina’s comment, Hildegard barked out a correction. Hildegard had yet to realize, however, that her reaction was exactly what Kristina was hoping for and was what prompted further teasing.

“All kidding aside, your powers as Úlfhéðinn are as useful as ever.”

That was Kristina’s honest opinion of Hildegard’s abilities.

She knew that Hildegard had a sense of smell and hearing that was equal to a wolf’s, but she hadn’t realized that Hildegard also had an equally impressive sense of direction. The reason Hildegard had been assigned to serve as a guide to the Galdhøpiggen Mountains unit led by the Claw Clan patriarch Botvid was because of those abilities. Unlike the Prymheimr Mountains force, there wasn’t an appropriate local guide to lead them. It was for that reason that Kristina and Hildegard, with their scouting abilities, had been chosen to lead them. In practice, their abilities, particularly Hildegard’s wolf-like physical abilities, seemed to show their true strength among the mountains, and their advance through the mountains had been smooth, with no major problems along the way.

“Quite useful. Perhaps you’d like to join my Vindálfs? I’d put you to better use.”

“No way. You’re clearly planning to run me ragged.”

“Yes, but that’ll provide more opportunities to prove your mettle.”

“Erm...”

Hildegard fell silent as she had no response to Kristina’s remark. After all, opportunities to prove herself were what Hildegard wanted above all else. Of course, Hildegard was now a company commander in the Múspell Unit and the Leader of Subordinates of the Panther Clan, but her ambitions were for a position much higher than that. Put simply, she wanted Yuuto’s chalice. To obtain that, she needed more accomplishments to her name.

“And, honestly, I feel like I could make better use of your abilities than Big Sister Sigrún. I think quite highly of you, you know?”

Hildegard was always being lectured and chided by Sigrún, so there was something pleasant about being told by someone that they thought highly of her. There was also an odd glint in Kristina’s eye.

“As proof, I’m even willing to offer you the position of my Second.”

“Your Second?!”

“Yes. Those who control information control the world. Those are Father’s words. As Second-in-Command of the Vindálfs, you could reign over the shadows in the Steel Clan.”

“‘Reign over’?!”

Hildegard’s eyes gleamed with interest as she repeated Kristina’s words. It was clear she was waffling over whether or not to take the offer.

Kristina quirked her lips into a smile as she felt she was one push away from convincing Hildegard. However...

“Hmm... Gah! I... I refuse your offer! I have no intention of serving under anyone other than His Majesty and Mother Rún!” Hildegard cried out, shaking her head intently, as though trying to convince herself.

It seemed she had returned to her senses, reminded at the last moment of her loyalty to Sigrún.

“Besides, I can’t trust anything that comes out of your mouth, you vixen!”

“Oh! That hurts. Please believe me.”

“Not convincing at all!”

“Well, fine. It was entertaining while it lasted.”

“Now you’re telling the truth, but I honestly didn’t want to learn that!”

“Heh, you really are adorable. I like you, Hilda.”

“Hrmph! I don’t like you at all!”

“My, my, a pity. How painful to be spurned by you.”

Kristina chuckled, her expression a sharp contrast to her words of disappointment.

They continued their advance, Kristina teasing Hildegard mercilessly along the way. Once they'd progressed a certain distance...

"Hold. I sense a large number of people ahead."

Hildegard held out her hand to the side, stopping the force's advance. Upon hearing Hildegard's comment, Kristina focused on her senses, sensing the presence that Hildegard mentioned.

"Yes, they're there."

"Mm, about four or five thousand."

"You can tell in that much detail? Are you sure you don't want to work for me?"

There weren't many people with a greater ability to detect enemies than Kristina. She really found herself wanting Hildegard for her Vindálfs.

"Not a chance."

But Hildegard's answer made her feelings on the matter clear. Alas, Kristina's love was doomed to be unrequited.

"Looks like you've found an amusing friend, Kris."

"Oh, Father. How are you feeling?"

Kristina turned around, chuckling. The man she turned to face wasn't her sworn father, Yuuto, but rather her birth father, Botvid, who had been placed in command of the Galdhøpiggen Mountains division.

"Haha, it was a bit taxing, but it was a leisurely little hike. Not a problem."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. It would be an embarrassment to the Claw Clan if you were useless when it mattered."

"As harsh as ever."

"Of course, it's a clan that will eventually be mine, after all. I can't have you ruining our name."

“Hah! I’m glad to hear that.”

Botvid laughed at his daughter’s casual remark.

While Botvid was seen as a cunning opponent, often described by both friend and foe alike as an adder or old fox, he was relatively sweet to his own daughters.

“Has Fundinn arrived safely at his staging area?”

“He has a guide, and he’s been told to take measures against altitude sickness, so he should be fine,” Kristina answered casually.

While they could easily check using her radio, the distance was such that it was at the very edge of its range.

“Then the only thing we can do is trust him and wait.”

Botvid nodded and took a seat.

Yes, all that was left to do was wait. It was three days later that the signal came, telling them that the battle had started.

Such were the events that led to the present battle between the Steel Clan and Silk Clan armies.

“Blast! Where are Logi and Huginn?!”

Utgarda threw a tantrum as she waited with the main body of the Silk Clan Army. Of course, part of it was because the forces she’d assigned to the right and left wings showed no sign of appearing from the mountains, but a great deal of her irritation came from the fact that her own forces were being pressed back by the Steel Clan Army’s long spears.

She was a woman whose ego reached into the heavens. She couldn’t stand the thought that she was losing.

“Damn, damn, damn!”

Her anger was at such a peak that she cursed loudly, not caring how undignified her words were, as she lashed her whip repeatedly at the ground. Her retainers could only watch her, trembling in fear.

“They’ll wish they’d died if they survive this battle. They’ll be demoted... No, they’ll be executed! We’ll lop off their heads and put them, as well as the heads of their kin, on display in front of the gates!”

The words made her retainers tremble even further. No matter how cruel, she would do whatever she declared she would do. That was what made Utgarda so terrifying.

“Messenger from Lord Logi!”

“A messenger?! If he has the time to send one, then he should be attacking!”

She snarled at the messenger who appeared before her, venting her anger at him. The messenger froze in fear at the sheer fury in her voice. That, too, simply made Utgarda even angrier.

“Damn you! Speak! What is it?!”

While Utgarda meant every word she had spat at the messenger, she also wanted to know what the messenger was here to say. She wanted—no, needed—to know what was happening. As the Silk Clan’s supreme commander, she wanted that information more than anyone.

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty! Currently, Lord Logi’s forces on the right wing are engaged with an enemy that suddenly appeared to his rear. They’re currently being pressed and aren’t able to move!”

“What?! An enemy?! Where did they come from?!”

“I-It seems... That they crossed the Prymheimr Mountains...”

“How?! That’s impossible!” Utgarda snarled as she glanced at the mountains that loomed above her to her right.

The Prymheimr Mountains had areas that were regarded as holy and untouchable by mortals. It wasn’t clear that it was actually caused by the gods, but it was well known that those who stepped into those areas grew sick. On occasion, some would die once they entered those places. It was madness to cross such mountains. Even if they were able to cross them, the soldiers would be useless by the end of their journey. Be that as it may, though, what was currently unfolding was that the Silk Clan’s soldiers were being pressed by this

surprise Steel Clan attack.

“Message from Lord Huginn!”

“What? Have they been attacked as well?!”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty! Impressive insight, Your Majesty!”

“Silence!”

“Guh?!”

The messenger tried to flatter her despite his shock and received a full lash of Utgarda’s whip against his face for his trouble. She was fully aware that he wasn’t trying to mock her, but flattery, when she’d been thoroughly caught flat-footed by the enemy, sounded less like praise and more like mockery. The man deserved his punishment, the incompetent and insensitive clod!

“Raaah!”

“Gah!”

Still angry, Utgarda lashed out again, her whip landing against the messenger’s back as he huddled in a fetal position.

She lashed out again. And again.

“Graah... Urrgh... F-Forgive me... Forgive me... Please forgive me...”

The messenger was curled up in a ball, his voice trembling as he begged for mercy. Watching him squirm settled Utgarda’s fury, and she regained some of her composure.

“Phew... All of you are useless. It seems We have to lead the fight ourselves. Bring the palanquin!” Utgarda called out sharply as she stood up.

Her palanquin was a custom design made especially for her. As it appeared atop its specially assigned mount, Utgarda quirked her lips up in a grin.

“We should have used this to begin with.”

If she had deployed this weapon at the start, she would have obliterated the Steel Clan Army regardless of what they had tried in front of the mountain pass. She would have been spared all these days of boredom.

Of course, creating this weapon wasn't a simple matter. It took quite a bit of time, effort, and wealth. She had kept these forces in reserve because she wanted to avoid any losses that could serve as obstacles to her conquest of the rest of Yggdrasil. That had been a miscalculation on her part. How frustrating.

"Heh, this gives a good view of the enemy."

Climbing atop her palanquin, Utgarda looked down at the scene before her, and her expression shifted to a pleased smile. Her belief in her victory, the despair the enemy would feel when faced with this weapon—those things washed away every last bit of disappointment that had been festering in her heart. With a look of triumphant glee, Utgarda raised her voice to issue her command.

"Skrýmirs! Follow us! It's time to trample the enemy underfoot!"

"Push! Puuush! It's time to finish this!"

Yuuto let out a cry loud enough to strain his throat. A general's shouts helped urge on his men.

The two flanking wings of the enemy's army were caught dealing with the forces he'd sent over the mountains, while the main body of his army was overwhelming the enemy's main body thanks to their phalanxes. Yuuto saw an opportunity for victory and made his move.

"Seems Lord Fundinn and Lord Botvid have done well," Felicia noted.

"Yeah, it must have been hard, but they've done their jobs," Yuuto responded.

"Heh, it might not have been that difficult thanks to your altitude sickness measures, Big Brother. If anything, a standard march might have been harder on them."

Felicia chuckled.

"Well, sure, I guess." Yuuto shrugged with a dry laugh.

Altitude sickness generally described the effects of the oxygen deprivation that manifested at elevations above twenty-four hundred meters. If they kept

their climbing below five hundred meters of altitude per day and took proper precautions to adapt to the elevation, even those with a low adaptability to low oxygen environments could avoid the symptoms of altitude sickness. Of course, no one in this era considered such a slow, leisurely advance to be an option. Because of that fact, no one had discovered this was a viable method to cope with altitude sickness until this point.

“Well, it was a long while ago, but I’m glad I remembered it.”

The Wolf Clan, where Yuuto had first served as patriarch, had made its home in lands that were surrounded by the Three Great Mountain Ranges. He had looked up methods to deal with altitude sickness just in case he had to take his armies over those mountains, but because he hadn’t needed to do so, the plans had been locked away in the recesses of his memory. Yuuto would never have imagined it would be useful at this late point.

“All right, it’s about time. Rún! You ready?!”

“Yes, whenever you wish!”

Sigrún’s confident voice came back sharply from the other end of the radio.

She had accomplished countless great feats by this point. She was the person Yuuto trusted most upon the battlefield. Yuuto’s lips curved up into a smile at the thought of deploying her forces.

“Very well! Charge! Teach them to fear your Múspells!”

“Yes, Father!”

She closed the line with her answer, and a moment later, the sound of countless hooves thundered on the battlefield.

The Múspells had made their move—The Hammer and Anvil Strategy.

It was Yuuto’s winning tactic, one he had employed since his days leading the Wolf Clan. It utilized the impregnable defenses of the phalanxes to hold down the enemy’s main force and used the speed of Sigrún’s Múspell Unit to flank them.

Facing phalanxes for the first time, without their reinforcements from their flanks no less, the enemy was clearly on the back foot. Even the cautious Yuuto

felt he was on the verge of victory and had started to relax when... His radio transceiver activated with an unpleasant rasp.

“Father!”

“What is it, Rún?!”

Yuuto tensed when he heard the strain in Sigrún’s voice. Sigrún rarely allowed her tension to come through in her tone. The fact that it was so audible made Yuuto realize the situation was dire.

“They’ve brought out their secret weapon! The horses won’t move out of fear!”

“What?!”

Yuuto furrowed his brow in surprise.

It was true that horses are, by nature, timid animals, but these were trained cavalry mounts, drilled to charge into enemy formations. The horses used by the Múspell Unit were trained not to cower against the enemy. What could possibly make them so afraid they wouldn’t move?

“What’s there? Just what is their secret weap... No, wait, I can see them from here.”

Yuuto’s voice was also tense.

The objects that appeared in his line of sight were enough to send a tremble of fear through him, even though he had experienced countless battlefields by this point.

They were big. Enormous, in fact.

Yuuto remembered being intimidated by the size of a horse the first time he saw one, but these animals were so much larger than horses that he could feel their presence even from this distance. Size was, on its own, a strength.

A flick of one of the animal’s gray snouts knocked over the heavily-armed infantry as though they were bowling pins. It was the first time since his battles with Steinpórr, the Dólgþrasir, that he’d seen his phalangites shoved aside so easily. There were thirty of those monsters arrayed in a line charging into his army. He found himself at a loss for how to respond.

“War elephants... Damn, I never would have expected those...”

Yuuto’s cheek twitched as he let out a dry laugh.

War elephants were, as their name implied, elephants trained for war. The domestication of elephants had supposedly started in the Indus Valley around 2000 BCE. They had initially been used as beasts of burden for agriculture, making use of their overwhelming strength, but by around 1100 BCE, they had started to be used in battle.

Utgarda’s use of war elephants was several centuries early, especially when considering Yggdrasil’s current technology level, but that was yet another example of her remarkable creativity and talent as a commander.

“Dammit, talk about coming out of nowhere.”

Yuuto spat out the words bitterly.

The Silk Clan was a clan very distant from those in the regions that closely surrounded the Steel Clan’s sphere of influence. The Steel Clan had also had tight restrictions on the amount of time they could spend gathering information on the Silk Clan. Kristina wasn’t omnipotent or omniscient either.

He understood all those things. At least, his mind understood those things. However, faced with the reality of war elephants bearing down upon his forces, Yuuto couldn’t help but utter complaints under his breath.

“Bahahahaha!”

On her palanquin atop her Skrímir, Utgarda flapped her feet happily as the elephant tore through the enemy lines. The phalangites that had been pushing back the Silk Clan Army cowered in fear at the approaching Skrímir and were being easily shoved aside at the animals’ charge. This was the most entertaining sight she’d ever seen. She felt all of her built-up frustration fizzling away as she watched it unfold.

“Weak! So weak, Steel Clan! Is that all you’ve got, eh?”

She laughed mockingly, gleefully gazing down at the enemy.

Even a war god was no match for her brilliance. The ranks of the war god’s

army were scattering in the face of her secret weapon. Utgarda basked in a sense of omnipotence, feeling that she, not Suoh-Yuuto, was worthy of being considered a god of war.

“Hah, such overwhelming power! To have come up with such a weapon... Our brilliance frightens even Us!”

She offered heartfelt praise for her own genius.

The first thing that made the war elephants so powerful was the sheer weight of their charge. They were able to crush enemy infantry underfoot and brush them aside. The enemy lines that had been so hard to break earlier were collapsing under the weight of her Skrýmirs. It was an overwhelming display of strength.

Next up were the arrows being unloaded from atop the giant bodies. The archers mounted upon the Skrýmirs had the advantage of height. They were able to see their targets clearly while remaining difficult to hit in return, and their height also gave them greater range. There was, perhaps, no better platform for archers.

The volleys of arrows being unleashed from atop the Skrýmirs sent the Steel Clan Army's soldiers into a panic.

“Chariots are the greatest weapon? The heroes of the battlefield?!”

That was true of the last age. It was no longer the case now.

“So *this* is the Steel Clan's ultimate cavalry unit, the Múspells?! These pitiful whelps unable to move at the sight of Our Skrýmirs? Hah! They're so pathetic it's worthy of mockery! Bahahahaha!”

Utgarda wasn't simply snorting with derision, she was breaking out into full-fledged laughter. She had known the war elephants were powerful, but this battle hardened her conviction. There was no way that she could have believed otherwise. Her Skrýmirs were the ultimate force on the battlefield.

“Suoh-Yuuto! Your forces will be crushed, and you'll be dragged before Us!”



“Dammit... What am I supposed to do against something like that...?”

While there was still quite a bit of distance between his current position and the advancing elephants, Yuuto felt despair as he watched the elephants wreak havoc. The Steel Clan Army soldiers that were gathered near their legs looked like toy soldiers as the elephants knocked them down. It may have perhaps been inappropriate gallows humor, but he couldn't help but think that the elephants made his men look like mere fleas in their presence.

“Big Brother, if things continue like this...”

“I'm well aware!”

Yuuto promptly responded to Felicia's heartrending remark, but he couldn't hide the anxiety welling up in his voice. That was how dire the situation was at that moment.

Though Yuuto had seen elephants countless times at the zoo, the Steel Clan soldiers were seeing elephants for the first time. Something so unimaginably large was bearing down on them at full tilt. Not only that, but arrows were raining down from atop those elephants as they charged.

A combination of their daily training, the strict military discipline that had been drilled into them, and their trust in Yuuto as a leader somehow kept the Steel Clan soldiers from breaking. They were miraculously maintaining their discipline and morale in the face of these overwhelming beasts of war, but they were clearly on the back foot, confused as to how to handle this novel opponent. Yuuto could easily imagine the panic that was swelling among the ranks. He needed to deal with it as quickly as possible.

“Tch. If only we had our tetsuhau with us.”

Yuuto clicked his tongue in frustration.

Elephants were animals, so they would have been frightened by the loud bangs of tetsuhau. However, much to their misfortune, the main body of Yuuto's army had none available to them. They had already been running short on gunpowder due to their recent string of battles, and the small number of tetsuhau the army had brought with them on this campaign had been distributed to the forces sent to deal with the flanking enemies. He had made

the decision because they were the perfect weapon for an ambush. His decision wasn't a mistake, particularly given what he had known at the time, but it was still painful not to have them on hand at the moment.

"...My phone doesn't get a signal here, either."

He took out his trusty smartphone and peered at the screen, but the signal strength icon was crossed out. That went without saying—he hadn't brought the divine mirror, after all. Even if he had, because the moon wasn't in the sky, he wouldn't have been able to connect to anything with it.

"Tch. If I'd known this would happen, I would've looked up how to deal with war elephants, too."

It was too late for regrets. This situation was something even Yuuto hadn't foreseen. No matter how much he dug through his memory, he couldn't find any reference to war elephants.

What should he do? What *could* he do? Should he withdraw his forces for now and regroup?

However, if the Flame Clan managed to fix their food shortages, he wouldn't be able to keep his forces here in the east. At this rate, though...

Just as Yuuto was about to fall into a mental labyrinth of his own making, a dry knocking noise rang out. Yuuto's elbow had apparently hit something, bringing him back to his senses.

"Mm?"

His gaze turned in the direction of the object, and he chuckled self-deprecatingly.

"Hah... 'The commander of an army must be able to stay level-headed in any and all circumstances,' was it? Sounds about right," Yuuto said to himself, trying to regain his composure and steel himself for what he needed to do. He placed his hand upon the hilt of the sword that now adorned his hip. This sword had once belonged to Skáviðr; he now wore it as a tribute to his departed friend. It seemed Skáviðr had come to him from Valhalla. Even death couldn't stop him from serving his lord.

Of course, that noise was probably just a coincidence, but Yuuto felt certain that Skáviðr was speaking to him. After all, if Skáviðr was watching, he couldn't very well embarrass himself in front of him. The moment he thought about Skáviðr's presence, he felt the choppy waters of his heart calm.

"Yeah. If I can't deal with this myself, then I certainly can't beat Oda Nobunaga."

Yuuto nodded to himself and put his smartphone away.

Nobunaga had repeatedly shown that he was capable of making moves that Yuuto had no way of anticipating in their most recent battle. If they were to face off again, Yuuto knew it was likely he would find himself in an unanticipated situation. He couldn't very well go around searching for responses in a situation where he needed to make a decision within seconds. Of course, it was still important to build up his knowledge beforehand, but he couldn't rely solely upon being able to do that. He wouldn't be able to defeat the monster that was Oda Nobunaga without the ability to think on his feet and adapt to whatever situation he faced. He had no option but to contemplate the matter and come up with a solution on his own. After all, Yuuto was the supreme commander of the Steel Clan Army.

"In... And out... Now, what to do..."

He cleared his mind with a deep breath and focused on his thoughts. The moment he did so, the sounds of the battle grew distant. The shouts of the soldiers, the clashes of the weapons, the rumble of the ground—while he could still hear those sounds, they felt far away. He felt something familiar—something warm—brush at his heart. It was at that moment that images began appearing in his head.

First came the photograph of the terrain that Kristina's subordinate had taken earlier. Then countless banners indicating his forces appeared upon that picture. The banners of the enemy forces also appeared on the field. It was an image he had formed using the combination of reports from the messengers, the known advance speed of his forces, and his own experiences of battle.

While Yuuto himself had no way of knowing this fact, he had an extremely accurate mental map of the current battlefield. Of course, that didn't mean he

grasped the positions with complete accuracy, but the differences between his mental map and reality were small—minor rounding errors at best. He had a remarkable level of understanding of the battlefield.

The reason it was difficult to command soldiers in battle was that understanding the relative positions of allies and enemies from the ground was an immensely challenging task. The ability to watch over the positions of his forces from above was a remarkable tool to have at his disposal. It was the kind of information that every commander wanted, but it was also the kind of information that was the hardest for a commander to get their hands on.

“Rún is... There. Rún! Pull back for now and circle further back around the enemy! If you get away from the elephants, you should be able to use your horses!” He shouted into the radio, which prompted a puzzled reply from Sigrún.

“...Oh! Th-That’s true. You’re right, Father. I can’t believe I didn’t...”

If the horses were useless around elephants because they were frightened by them, then the first thing to do was to get the horses away from them. It seemed an obvious response at first glance. However, when faced with an unknown situation, particularly one that involved life and death, people tended to find their minds going blank, leaving them unable to reach even the most basic and obvious of solutions. Even the ordinarily unflappable Sigrún was no exception to this rule. The sheer psychological impact of seeing war elephants for the first time was huge, even for her.

“Claes Company, Alrekr Company, Gale Company, step to the left a hundred paces. Thír Company, Erna Company, Hrönn Company, one hundred paces to the right!”

Yuuto continued to issue rapid-fire orders to the various companies under his command. Felicia initially stared in open-mouthed shock at the sheer precision of his orders, but she quickly began to see what he was trying to accomplish.

“A-Amazing...”

The charging war elephants passed through the spaces between the companies. Like the phalanxes, the war elephants weren’t able to execute quick changes in direction. Having lost the targets they were supposed to crush, the

elephant riders hurriedly tried to turn their elephants, but it took them time to respond to the events unfolding before them. They probably weren't used to controlling them in battle just yet, either.

Yuuto wasn't the kind of man to miss an opening like that.

"Right, the elephants have stopped. Use the opportunity to strike at their legs!"

Quickly after Yuuto issued his orders, the soldiers began to swarm the war elephants. Even their short brush with the Skrímir was enough to teach them how much of a danger they represented. They wouldn't get another opportunity to deal with them. Their fear of the elephants drove them forward. No matter how thick an elephant's legs and no matter how tough their hides, even they couldn't withstand the simultaneous attacks of dozens of long spears assaulting them. Thunderous thuds echoed across the battlefield. It was the sound of the Skrímir's collapsing under the weight of the attacks.

"There!"

Yuuto made a fist in triumph.

Of course, he had no way of knowing, but this had been the method that Scipio Africanus, the supreme commander of the Roman Army at the Battle of Zama, had used to defeat Hannibal's eighty Skrímir's. The difference, however, was that Scipio Africanus had been aware of the fact that Hannibal had war elephants and had prepared his units in advance. Yuuto hadn't known anything about them, nor had he trained his units to deal with them. He had come up with this solution on the fly, moving his infantry companies to deal with the elephants.

"Oh my... For you to be able to command your forces with such finesse is truly stunning, Big Brother. It's as if you're moving them like you would your own arms or legs—no, perhaps even as precisely as moving your fingertips! If I knew no better, I would say that you were able to see the battlefield from above!"



Although Felicia understood just how great Yuuto's abilities as a tactician were, she could only stare in shock at the sheer precision of his tactical maneuvers.

Her observation was, in a sense, correct, however. Yuuto was viewing the battlefield from above—something that should have been impossible for a field commander on the ground. In a way, it seemed similar to the powers of Hárbarth, the patriarch of the Spear Clan, but it was a completely different beast.

Among elite basketball and soccer players, there were rare examples of players who had a sense of spatial awareness that made it seem as though they were watching the game from above. There was a TV show experiment where a famous soccer player demonstrated that he had an accurate grasp of where every player was on the pitch. Of course, it went without saying that no matter how talented the individual was—given that they were human in the end—they couldn't *literally* see the ground from the sky.

However, some players had such a precise grasp of the events unfolding that the only possible way to explain it was that they did indeed see games from above. They were able to do so because of their ability to process information. They constantly gathered information as things changed around them, combined it with modeling of tactics and individual behavior, running speed, and other variables they grasped from sheer experience. They then processed that information through subconscious calculations and created extremely precise mental maps of the area around them.

Yuuto was doing the same thing. This was a skill that he had developed through his intense experiences on the battlefield over his teens—the stage in someone's life when these experiences most shaped and contributed to a person's growth.

"It's probably thanks to Rífa."

Yuuto gently touched near his left eye and smiled nostalgically. He too grasped his own rapid growth. Felicia's eyes widened with surprise.

"Could it be... That your abilities as an Einherjar have manifested?! But wait, aren't your powers sealed because of the Gleipnirs...?"

“Yeah, they’re still sealed.”

The most that Yuuto could do with his sealed twin runes was have a vague sense of the flow of ásmegin. When he had looked inside himself with that grasp of his ásmegin, he saw that the immense ásmegin within him was still restrained under countless layers of chains.

“That said, the little strength that seeped out of the seals gave me the push I needed.”

Yuuto glanced at his palm and clenched his hand into a fist, as though grasping at something.

Yuuto hypothesized that an Einherjar’s abilities were innate skills that were already present within an individual that had been brought out and enhanced through the strange power of álfkipfer. That meant that this power was something that had been in Yuuto all along and had been nurtured by his experiences to date. The talent had always been there. It had been the push from his late wife, Sigrdrífa, that had caused it to blossom. Yuuto gazed up at the clear blue sky and spoke as though addressing his departed wife.

“Thanks, Rífa... I’ve received the gift that you left for me.”

“No way! This isn’t happening! It’s just not feasible! This is impossible! Utterly impossssssible!”

The Silk Clan Prymr Utgarda, sat atop her beloved elephant, was tearing out her hair as though she had gone completely mad and was repeatedly screaming to herself. The unflappable confidence that had survived all of her previous setbacks on the battlefield had been shattered, and she was in a complete panic. It was, in a way, understandable.

“Our Skrírmirs... Our Skrírmirs... All lost?!”

As she had just made very clear, it shouldn’t have been possible.

She had been prepared to lose at least one or two elephants. Even if she had lost five, she probably would have been able to sourly accept her losses, but her mind steadfastly refused to accept the fact that every single one of her Skrírmirs had been wiped out.

But that wasn't all. The Steel Clan Army had regrouped and was now charging at the Silk Clan Army. The Steel Clan forces, evidently having rallied themselves by defeating the dreaded Skrímir, seemed to have even more momentum than earlier. The cavalry units that she thought had fled from the battlefield in fear of the Skrímir had regrouped and were now attacking her rear flank. The Silk Clan Army had suddenly found itself on the brink of defeat.

“Why?! WHY?! WHHHHY?!”

Utgarda couldn't understand what had just happened. The Steel Clan Army had clearly been in utter chaos after encountering elephants for the first time and had very much been on the back foot. Their soldiers had been but a step away from breaking and fleeing in an unorganized rabble, or so it had appeared. That was the only way she could have interpreted the events that had occurred until now.

Almost as if to spite her for her overconfidence, the Steel Clan Army had suddenly divided their companies, letting the elephants pass through, and they had slain the elephants as they struggled to change direction. That chain of events was exactly what had happened, and what Utgarda herself had witnessed, but she still couldn't believe what she had seen.

First of all, it shouldn't have been possible for someone to come up with such a precise method to deal with the Skrímir so quickly. The Steel Clan Army had never seen them before!

On top of that, she couldn't believe that soldiers who were facing giant monsters that were crushing their allies underfoot and sweeping them aside with their trunks could maintain their discipline. The panic the Skrímir sowed in their wake should have reduced the Steel Clan's soldiers to little more than a confused mass of bodies.

To Utgarda, people were all weak, fragile things. When people were driven to the very edge of their fear, and especially when they were faced with imminent death, they spiraled into panicked despair. That was how people were supposed to behave in Utgarda's world. She couldn't even imagine how to develop the discipline and trust among her soldiers that they would have needed to maintain their composure in the face of certain death.

“Is he truly a god of war...?!”

Utgarda’s body began to tremble, and her teeth clattered as she shuddered. This was the first time in her life that she, herself, felt fear.

“Th-Th-There’s no way to w-w-win against him!”

Utgarda let out a shrill note of despair, her voice trembling with fear. This was the first time she had been thoroughly routed by someone superior to her in power, and the experience had broken her spirit.

Yuuto and Nobunaga had been tempered by their experiences, having suffered countless setbacks and disappointments in their lives. They would have reacted quite differently from Utgarda, redoubling their efforts and bouncing back from their defeats with renewed energy. But Utgarda had overwhelmed her opponents to this point, relying almost entirely on her natural talents, never being tested in the process. Whatever she wanted to accomplish, she had accomplished with ease. It just came naturally to her. She had never faced any notable setbacks in her life, nor had she ever faced crushing disappointment, which made her all too vulnerable when faced with the reality of her own shortcomings.

“R-Re... Re... Re...”

She found it difficult to form the words. Her mouth was dry, her tongue felt leaden. Her heart was beating wildly, and she clutched at her chest in discomfort. Utgarda hadn’t exerted herself, but she found it hard to breathe. No matter how much air she gulped down, she still felt short of breath. The color had drained from her face, her lips had turned purple, and her face twitched as it froze in a rictus of fear. There was no trace of her usual haughty beauty. Still, she somehow drew herself together just long enough to shout out her orders.

“Re-Re-Retreat! RETREAT!”

“Father, one of those gray monsters is leaving the battlefield. It has an elaborate palanquin on its back. I believe that’s Utgarda, the enemy patriarch.”

Sigrún’s report came through the radio around the time that the tide had

turned completely in the Steel Clan Army's favor and the battle was all but decided. It was about the right timing for the enemy's supreme commander to flee. It seemed to Yuuto that panic was rapidly spreading through the enemy ranks. It was likely the result of the enemy's supreme commander leaving the field. This was a perfect opportunity.

"Right then, let's pursu—"

The words died in Yuuto's mouth as he tried to issue the order to pursue. He recalled the last time he had ordered a pursuit. His forces had pursued the retreating Flame Clan Army, walking straight into Nobunaga's trap. His misjudgment had cost Skáviðr his life. While Yuuto was well aware that winning and losing were both parts of a general's life, and he had learned to accept it over the years, the loss of one of his most trusted subordinates had left a lasting trauma on his psyche. The wound was still fresh, and it was far from healed. The fact that the Silk Clan Army had used a feint retreat in the initial skirmish played into his hesitation. Yuuto felt his pulse quicken and sweat beaded on his brow.

"B-Big Brother?! What's wrong?!"

Noticing Yuuto's sudden change, Felicia called over to him in concern.

Yuuto clutched at his chest, his breathing labored. He was afraid; he was deathly afraid of the possibility that a misjudgment here might result in losing another member of his sworn family. Just a brief reminder of what had happened was enough to trigger a panic attack.

However, pursuit battles were the moments in which armies could turn a close victory into a complete rout. It was no exaggeration to say that without pursuing and destroying the enemy, a battle couldn't truly be described as won. If he didn't overcome his trauma, there was no future for him or his people. Yuuto tightly gripped the hilt of the sword at his hip and let out a deep breath. He flexed his stomach muscles, and with sheer force of will subdued the fear threatening to take over his body.

"It's fine. I'm fine."

With that, Yuuto smiled at Felicia.

The physical symptoms of his anxiety quickly subsided, as though it had never happened at all. He once again focused on his mental map and returned to his realm. Now that he had entered that realm once, he had grasped the secret to entering that mindset at will.

He saw the territory in his head again. All of his unnecessary thoughts faded away, and he felt his senses sharpen. He placed himself into a state of intense concentration. In the sports world, this state of mind was often referred to as being “in the zone.” Sigrún’s “Realm of Godspeed” was based on the same principles.

“There’s quite a bit of confusion and fear in the enemy’s voices and expressions. The circumstances, the number of soldiers, the terrain... Yes, there’s basically no chance of this being a feint,” Yuuto murmured, as though to himself, checking over the information he gathered.

His new ability didn’t just allow him to see the battlefield from above. That was simply an effect that accompanied his new power. What his ability actually provided was a massive increase in his ability to gather information through his sharpened senses and a means to rapidly process and analyze it due to his improved concentration. Yuuto could now pick up even the smallest bits of information that others might miss, add it to his current analysis, and come up with a more precise and accurate solution to the situation at hand.

Increasing the amount of information at his disposal vastly increased the accuracy of his conclusions. It was like how a pyramid could be taller based on how large the surface area of its foundation was. In essence, the abilities that Yuuto had honed through years of experience had now been massively boosted thanks to being in the zone.

“Very well! Pursue them, Rún! Don’t let them go! We’ll follow after you!”

Overcoming his trauma, Yuuto issued his orders. There wasn’t a trace of fear or doubt in his voice. He stated his order with total conviction.

“Sniff... Why...? Why must We go through this?!”

Utgarda hid under a blanket in the cargo section of an officer’s chariot, muttering to herself with tears in her eyes. She had quickly switched to the

chariot from her Skrímir's palanquin soon after departing the battlefield. A Skrímir was far too conspicuous, making it a perfect target for the enemy. Being atop a Skrímir was just asking for the enemy to come after her, cutting off any chance of retreat. Her Skrímir was her precious companion, one she had adored since its birth, but it wasn't more important to her than her life.

She had placed a decoy upon the Skrímir's palanquin. That should at least buy her a bit of time. She planned to use that time to escape. Although the defeat had shattered her calm and confidence, she still had her innate cunning working in her favor.

"Hurry! Faster!" Utgarda shrilly urged on her chariot driver.

While she had bought time with her decoy, there was no guarantee of escape. The Steel Clan had their cavalry units, after all. She had mocked them when her victory seemed certain, but they were the greatest threat to her at the moment.

It went without saying, but cavalry units were fast. They were by far the fastest military units in Yggdrasil. Utgarda found herself glancing back in worry, fearful that she'd soon see the enemy appear to her rear. She felt a rising panic at the prospect of their approach.

"We're going as fast as we can! Any faster and the horses won't last!"

"Do it anyway! All we need to do is get to the nearest fortress! Run the horses to the ground if that's what it takes!"

Caught up with her own survival, Utgarda screeched out the orders. She didn't want to die. That was the thing she wanted to avoid most. All that was on her mind was her survival.

"...Eep!"

Utgarda shrank back with a tremble of fear as she heard the sound she most dreaded. Distant at first, it steadily grew in volume as the source of that sound approached. It was the steady drum of hoofbeats; it was the rumbling beat of cavalry mounts galloping against the hard earth.

"N-No! That's the sound of our chariots! That's what it has to be!" She said aloud to herself.

She understood the situation in her heart. She covered herself with her blanket and hoped against hope that her observation was true.

She hesitantly peeked out from the blanket. The first thing she saw was a glint of silver.

“The M-Mánagarmr?!”

It was the worst possible sight that she could have imagined. She saw the silver hair of the Steel Clan’s greatest huntress—the hound that had taken countless heads of the Steel Clan’s vanquished enemies. Utgarda herself was an Einherjar, and with her immense innate talent, she was confident in her abilities in battle. Had it been an ordinary cavalry trooper chasing her, she would have immediately taken them down herself, but under the circumstances, she had no intention of facing up against the woman who was reputed to be the greatest warrior in Yggdrasil. Further, there were over a hundred troopers following in Sigrún’s wake. In comparison, Utgarda’s honor guard consisted of a dozen or so chariots. There was no chance that her forces could win.

“Blast! That’s why We told you to hurry!”

“Th-There’s nothing that I could have...”

“Curse you! You are no longer needed! Out of Our way!”

“Huh?! Nooo!”

Utgarda shoved the driver off the chariot and took the reins herself. The chariot was substantially lighter, having shed the weight of a grown man. With that weight reduction, she figured her chariot should move much faster. This was no time for half-measures.

“You lot! Kill that silver-haired dog! Hold back the pursuit! You’ll have whatever your heart desires if you do!”

Utgarda shouted encouragement to her escort. As members of her honor guard, the warriors in the chariots around her were skilled in their own right, but they were too badly outnumbered to make a difference. She had no expectations of them slaying the Mánagarmr. Utgarda was only trying to buy time for her own escape. However, her hopes were dashed in the blink of an eye.

“Screw that!”

“I’m going to surrender!”

“I’m done!”

Her escort immediately lost the will to fight and began tossing aside their weapons. Utgarda had certainly deserved that fate. She had indulged herself as a tyrant. It had been an everyday occurrence for her to lash out with her whip against her subordinates to vent her frustration. She had, at times, killed family members and friends of her subordinates on a whim. Just now, in fact, Utgarda had tossed aside her driver to save her own skin and was trying to flee using her subordinates as a shield. What sense of loyalty could anyone feel to a woman like that? The Oath of the Chalice was absolute in Yggdrasil, but even that had its limits. As the scene played out, the terrifying silver-maned wolf rapidly closed the distance with Utgarda.

“Hah! You have no support, it seems! Far different from Father! The decoy on your palanquin surrendered without a fight and described your chariot and the direction you fled in!”

As she mocked the Silk Clan patriarch, the silver wolf threw the spear in her hand. The spear found its way into one of the chariot’s wheels and forcefully stopped its spin. The other wheel continued to turn. The unbalanced chariot immediately flipped over, throwing Utgarda to the ground.

“Guh!”

She somehow managed to roll and break her fall, but losing her chariot was a heavy blow. There was no way she could escape from this many mounted troopers on foot.

What to do? What to do? What to do?

The same words played repeatedly through Utgarda’s mind as the silver wolf dismounted. She drew the odd-looking blade on her hip and approached Utgarda on foot.

“Heh, I’ve been waiting for this moment.”

With that comment, the silver wolf’s features took on a frighteningly cold

smile. Her voice was filled with an unmistakable fury.

“Your insults toward Father went too far,” the silver wolf continued, a bone-chilling edge to her voice.

For a moment, Utgarda had no idea what she was talking about, but then it hit her. She remembered what she had done. She had sent her soldiers to shout every imaginable insult at Suoh-Yuuto in an attempt to lure out the Steel Clan. She had been frustrated at the fact that it seemed to have no effect, but she was now learning that it had angered Suoh-Yuuto’s children immensely. How could things possibly get any worse?

“Duel me. I swore that I’d kill you by my own hand.”

The silver wolf took up a combat stance, her sword in hand. A heartbeat later, the wolf had closed the distance.

“Ahh!”

Utgarda reacted by drawing the sword on her hip to block the wolf’s slash. The blow was heavy.

Just as Utgarda’s resolve had been broken by the sheer weight of the wolf’s blow, she heard the unpleasant ring of rending metal.

“Wh-Whaat?!”

Utgarda jumped back in panic. Her sword had a sharp crack running along its length.

“Wha?! Impossible!” Utgarda yelled. “What is that weapon?! For it to be superior in strength to the metal of the gods... What was that sword made out of?!”

As far as Utgarda was aware, smelted iron was superior in strength to star metal. But despite that, her blade had cracked with a single blow. Utgarda’s sword was a masterpiece that had been crafted by the Silk Clan’s greatest swordsmith, but even it would only last another two or three blows against the wolf’s blade.

That wasn’t all, though...

The silver wolf wielding the blade had breathtaking skill with her sword. With

just one exchange, Utgarda had realized the sheer gulf in their skill. She couldn't possibly win. There was no way she could defeat a monster like this. Every fiber of her being screamed out that fact to her.

"It's over."

"S-Stay away!"

Utgarda tossed aside her sword and drew the whip from her hip. In practiced hands, a whip's lash was substantially faster than a sword, but the silver wolf easily avoided that whip lash. Utgarda knew it was over at that moment. She was facing an unbeatable monster. Utgarda couldn't see any hope of victory.

The goddesses of fate were fickle. They often punished those who deserved glory and rewarded those who deserved punishment. Such things were relatively common. This very moment was yet another example of that: Utgarda's lash had landed upon the horse from her abandoned chariot. Shocked at the sudden pain to its face, the enraged horse charged at the silver wolf.

"Wha?!"

It seemed this turn of events caught even the silver wolf by surprise, and her eyes went wide with shock. Still, she was a warrior whose name was feared throughout Yggdrasil. She leaped to the side and avoided the charging horse.

"Ugh, damn!"

While the silver wolf's body had avoided the charging horse, her sword wasn't so lucky, and it flew into the air as the horse's hooves shoved it aside. Utgarda's lips twisted into a malicious grin.

"Bahahaha! It seems the gods love Us after all!"

She couldn't come to any other conclusion. It was an amazing opportunity. She drew back her whip to attack...

...which was when her luck ran out. Utgarda should have used this opportunity to jump on the horse and run. If she had, she might have been able to escape. Utgarda had made a gross misjudgment. She had no chance even against the disarmed silver wolf.

“Wha?! She disap...guh!”

A moment after the silver wolf vanished from her line of sight, a hand grabbed her by the throat. Something then caught Utgarda’s leg, and she collapsed to the ground.

“To waste such a golden opportunity... You truly are nothing compared to Father.”

As she heard the words of disdain, Utgarda felt the grip on her throat tighten. In a panic, she tried to peel the hand from her throat with both hands, but the grip didn’t loosen. She was going to die. The silver wolf was going to kill her here. The realization unleashed a flood of emotions from Utgarda.

“H-H-Heeeelp! Please don’t kill me!”

Tears flooded from her eyes as she sobbed in a panic, all traces of her dignity long gone. The evil tyrant was nowhere to be found. All of her pride—all of her self-confidence—had completely vanished. All that remained was a pathetic woman who trembled in the face of her impending death.

“I can’t brea... Help! Please! Have mercy!... I-I’ll do anything!”

Utgarda continued to beg for her life, even as she struggled to breathe. However, her opponent wasn’t one to be lulled into granting mercy from such pleas. Even as she pleaded for her life, the grip on Utgarda’s throat grew stronger.

“Gah... Sto... Can’t... Plea...”

Her consciousness began to slip away, and her voice grew ragged. Just as she was nearing her limit and the darkness approached...

“Mm? Wha?!”

The silver wolf let out a cry of surprise.

“She’s wet herself?!” The silver wolf spat out sourly.

Now that the wolf mentioned it, Utgarda indeed felt a warmth around her crotch. Though, with her consciousness slipping away, she couldn’t understand what it meant. All she understood...

“Dammit, you brought *her* to mind... Tch. I don’t feel like killing you anymore.”

...was that the hand that had been squeezing her throat had suddenly relaxed.

However, it wasn’t an easy matter to recover from being choked nearly to death. Utgarda’s consciousness fell away, and she was engulfed in darkness.

“So, you’re the Silk Clan patriarch Utgarda.”

Yuuto rested his cheek against his palm and looked down at the young woman that the Múspells had hauled into the tent. She wasn’t much different in age from him. At a glance, she appeared to be a beautiful woman. She had a cold, chiseled beauty, rather than cute or pretty features. However, perhaps it was his own preconception of her, but he couldn’t help but feel her expression dripped with sadism and malice.

“Eep!”

Utgarda let out a soft yelp, her body tensing. Yuuto looked skeptically at her, thinking for a moment it was an act to draw sympathy, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Utgarda was trembling. She was clearly afraid.

“P-Please don’t kill me! Please don’t kill me!”

He almost felt pity for her as she shrilly repeated the words like a mantra.

The woman before him didn’t look anything like the woman who had put down a rebellion, conquered a neighboring clan, and had nearly had Yuuto’s own Steel Clan Army on the ropes. She also looked nothing like the arrogant tyrant he had heard her described as. He had put on an air of intimidation to make sure she wouldn’t underestimate him, but her appearance had been anticlimactic, to say the least.

“I-I’ll do anything. You can have the knowledge of iron-smelting, elephant rearing, and silk manufacturing. S-So p-please... J-Just... Please, have mercy.”

“Sigh...”

Yuuto couldn’t help but let out a sigh of exasperation. All of the items that

Utgarda had offered to teach him were state secrets for the Silk Clan. To offer them out before Yuuto had said anything at all... Utgarda was clearly a complete amateur at negotiation.

“U-Um... Oh! I know! H-How about the women of my clan?! Th-They have supple skin and are known for their beauty! You can have as many... As many hundreds as you wish!”

She was evidently very frightened by Yuuto’s sigh, and she blabbed onward, offering further concessions. No doubt the offer came from taking Yuuto’s reputation as a womanizer at face value. He found the fact somewhat irritating, but he didn’t really have any standing to deny it, so he let it go for the moment.

“So, the rumors of you only caring for yourself were true, huh?” Yuuto said with heartfelt contempt, the only reaction he could muster being a dry laugh.

Utgarda made no effort to sacrifice anything herself, offering her clan and her people up instead without a moment’s hesitation. She was a contemptible example of a patriarch. Utgarda was the complete opposite of Linnea, the woman who had tried to do everything in her power, including offering herself as a sacrifice, for the sake of her clan and her people.

“What a disappointment.” Yuuto sighed again, incredibly disappointed with the woman in front of him.

The reports had stated the Silk Clan patriarch was an extremely capable individual, and he had felt that his experience in facing off against her on the battlefield had only confirmed those reports. While she was an excessively tyrannical ruler and could only be described as a malicious person, there was a part of being a ruler that required the ability to be ruthless when necessary. He had hoped that had been part of her character. The malice was there, but there was nothing else of worth about this woman.

“Eep! I-I’m an Einherjar and one of the great ones chosen by the gods! No doubt I will be of great use to you compared to the ordinary sort! I’m not like those useless incompetents! I-I-I will do anything you ask! If you wish me to lick your feet, I’ll do so! So please, please! Spare my life!”

Frightened by Yuuto’s cold stare, she gazed up pleadingly at him, before bowing her head and rubbing it against the floor in a cry for mercy. She valued

her own life above all else.

Of course, the same could be said for Yuuto. He had no intention of denying that he put value in his own life. That's what it meant to be human. Even so, he wanted people to have some sense of dignity—some sense of pride. He couldn't trust a person like Utgarda, someone who would so easily offer to sell out the people of her clan, or even her clan as a whole. And without that trust, she was of no use to him. Yuuto had no way of knowing this, but those had been the very words that Utgarda had used to coolly dismiss Þjazi, the Tiger Clan traitor.

"Ah, I see. This girl's got no dedication to anything."

The words came to him like a divine revelation. He remembered that Sigrún had said something similar to him when he first came to Yggdrasil. He recalled being angry at the time, but now he understood what she meant. Yuuto wanted to believe he wasn't nearly as bad as Utgarda, but in either case, there was no way he could use a person like this.

"Remember this, lad. What separates success and failure, life and death, isn't brains, brawn, power, or wealth. Those are all simply tools. What matters in the end is the strength of will to see your goals through to the end, no matter what happens."

He remembered those words well—the words of his late sworn father, Fárbauti. He agreed with those words. The woman, no, the girl before him, didn't have that strength of will.

"If I never knew failure, and if everything had gone as I'd hoped... Perhaps I would have ended up like her."

Yuuto thought back to the boy he had been and couldn't help but let out a self-deprecating laugh. This girl could have been him. The least he could do was give her an opportunity to change. He had made his decision.

"Fine. I'll spare your life."

"T-Truly?! Th-Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Utgarda's features, which until now had been pale with dread, quickly brightened as she looked up at him with relief. Learning that she'd live was

apparently a great relief to her.

“But all I’m sparing is your life. Starting today... You’re a slave. Hopefully, you learn what it was like to be on the receiving end of your tyranny.”

“Huh?! N-No! A slave...?!”

The moment she learned she wouldn’t die, her pride had started to reassert itself. It was clear from her expression that she wanted to avoid slavery at all costs. She had been born as a patriarch’s daughter, had been spoiled from birth, and she had indulged herself with luxuries since becoming Prymr. No doubt she felt she wouldn’t be able to stand the life of a slave. That was exactly why Yuuto felt it was the right step to take, though.

“This is a settled matter,” Yuuto said bluntly, the finality clear in his voice.

Hitting rock bottom was often what was needed for addicts, such as gambling addicts and alcoholics, to seek recovery. By hitting rock bottom, it motivated the individual to improve their situation and make changes to themselves. In fact, many believed that experience was a prerequisite for recovering from an addiction. Yuuto felt that Utgarda needed a similar experience. He had no way of knowing whether Utgarda would break upon hitting rock bottom or if she would take it as an opportunity to fix what was wrong with her.

The ball was completely in Utgarda’s court. He could watch over her for a few years and decide what to do with her after. He had nothing else to say to her.

Yuuto stood up and declared sharply, “Right! Time to liberate the Tiger Clan capital of Gastropnir!”

EPILOGUE

“Sieg þjóðann! Sieg þjóðann!”

The Steel Clan Army was welcomed into Gastropnir by the cheers of the Tiger Clan’s people. It had been only a month or so since the Silk Clan’s conquest, but the people of the Tiger Clan had suffered greatly under their rule. The Silk Clan had looted all of the valuables and food from the city, destroyed homes, and allowed many of the city’s young women to be raped—even those who were married or had children. Although that was the accepted fate of losing clans in Yggdrasil, there was an enormous amount of pent-up rage and resentment toward the Silk Clan.

Then their saviors had appeared, defeating and driving off the tyrannical Silk Clan occupiers. Not only had these saviors liberated them, but they had also acted with the utmost civility, even providing the people of Gastropnir with food. The þjóðann, the leader of those saviors, was now paying a visit to their city. It was only natural that the people of Gastropnir would rejoice and break out into cheers.

“Slow.”

Fwip! Crack!

“Eep!”

Kristina’s whip lashed out from the driver’s seat and hit the former Prymr of the Silk Clan, Utgarda—who was now nothing more than a slave—on the rear. The yelp that spilled out from Utgarda’s lips was a sound completely unbecoming of a tyrannical Prymr.

Utgarda was currently pulling the chariot carrying Yuuto, Felicia, and Kristina by herself. Something like this wouldn’t have been possible for an ordinary young woman, but Utgarda was an Einherjar. She had no trouble pulling the chariot. The problem wasn’t her physical ability—rather, it was more to do with her mindset.

“Curse you... I’m the Prymr! How dare you treat me like... Eep!”

Utgarda turned around and tried to utter words of protest, but was struck into silence by Kristina’s whip.

“Now, now. Stop complaining and pull the chariot. Heh.”

“Grr...!”

Utgarda’s face twisted in a humiliated snarl as she resumed pulling the chariot. She had realized that any resistance would be met with whip lashes. Of course, she generally forgot that after a while and resumed her insubordination.

“Don’t push her too hard.”

Yuuto chided Kristina softly, in a tone too quiet for Utgarda to hear. While he knew that Utgarda was someone who deserved to be punished for her actions and that she should be made to suffer somewhat, he still didn’t enjoy watching women get beaten.

Why, then, was he going through with this display? Because it was a demonstration. Making a previous ruler put on rags and pull the chariot showed the people that her reign was well and truly over. Further, by humiliating Utgarda, the former tyrant, in front of the Tiger Clan’s people, he not only helped release the people’s pent-up frustration but also drew their support. It was a scheme that let him kill three birds with one stone.

“Heheh, I’m taking it easy on her. The trick is in the wrist. It sounds loud, but it doesn’t hurt all that much.”

“R-Really?”

It certainly didn’t look that way to Yuuto, though he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know all the details. Something in his head warned him not to ask any further questions on the subject.

“Yes. It’d be quite a pity to break a toy so lovely as her. I can see something of myself in her. It’s hard to describe... There’s just something enjoyable about breaking someone like that. Heheh.”

Kristina was a girl in her mid-teens—certainly too young to be imbibing

alcohol—but her expression had the flush of warmth that made her appear faintly drunk as she shivered in pleasure at being able to satisfy her sadistic urges.

Yuuto couldn't help but turn his gaze away. He found himself looking up at the sky. He had put Kristina in charge of Utgarda because he felt she needed to be taught a lesson, but perhaps that choice had been the wrong one. All he could do was offer a small prayer for Utgarda's future.

EPILOGUE II

“My Great Lord. It appears that the Steel Clan has defeated the Silk Clan.”

“Ah, is that so? Well, that was expected.”

Nobunaga nodded without much interest as he listened to Ran’s report and bit into his loaf of bread.

It would have been one thing if the report included details about how the war had progressed and what steps Yuuto had taken to win, but he had no interest in learning just the outcome, which he had known from the beginning. It was more important for him to sate his hunger. After all, an army marched on its stomach.

“Hrmph. I still find that this bread isn’t very satisfying.”

Nobunaga let out a sigh as he finished his bread. It wasn’t that he disliked the flavor, but being as thoroughly Japanese as he was, he sorely missed the taste of rice.

“Mm... If I recall, the lad mentioned that there’s a continent called Europe across the ocean to the east of Yggdrasil, yes?” Nobunaga murmured to himself as though the memory had just come to him.

“Yes. I too recall him mentioning as much.”

“If that’s true, then if we go far to the east of *that*, we would find my homeland. Heh, it might be entertaining to invade there once we’ve conquered Yggdrasil.”

Nobunaga didn’t believe in idling. He only knew one way of living. He was driven by his need to constantly make progress toward his ambitions.

“Yes... I would also very much like to eat rice again before I die.”

“Indeed. But for that, we first need to take care of the Steel Clan.”

Nobunaga knew from his vast experience that the only way to achieve a great ambition was to methodically take each small step required to reach that goal.

“No doubt he intended to absorb Jötunheimr while we’re unable to move and strengthen his hand as a result, but we won’t simply sit idle and let him do that, will we?”

Nobunaga grinned impishly. There was no trace of malice or sadism in Nobunaga’s grin, unlike the Silk Clan Þrymr Utgarda. It was more akin to a boyish grin, that of a child looking forward to playing with a greatly anticipated toy.

“We have a secret weapon, after all,” Nobunaga said and gently patted the head of the young girl sitting next to him.

The girl was no more than ten years old and was happily munching on a loaf of bread. She was Homura, the daughter he’d had here in Yggdrasil.

“Yes? What is it, Daddy?”

Homura looked up at Nobunaga, the black hair she’d inherited from her father parting as she gazed up. Her eyes sparkled with a golden hue, her twin runes clearly visible.

To be continued...

Afterword

I'm very sorry about the afterword to the previous volume! Know that I am offering you the deepest kowtow I can muster.

It is I, Takayama! I'm very sorry for writing such a cheerful and enthusiastic afterword at the end of the previous volume even though it had ended on such a somber note. I realized I'd made a mistake when I got the sample volume and went back over the contents. Please forgive me!

Anyway... It's been a while. Hello.

If I may offer an excuse, when writing a light novel, the afterword's length is decided after the total page count of the novel is decided, so it's written as part of a completely different process. So when I'd written the afterword for volume fifteen, I was over the moon at the anime adaptation announcement. I couldn't contain my excitement. I felt the blood drain from my face when I saw what it looked like in the sample book. I really am sorry if that afterword dampened any of the lingering emotions that the previous volume's end had imparted upon you. I'll do my best to make sure this doesn't happen in the future.

Now, setting aside the serious matters for the moment, I'd like to move on to something a little lighter. I think it'll be happening about a week after this volume is released...

The first episode of *The Master of Ragnarok* anime will be airing!

I was actually an extra in one of the scenes in the first episode. They've even put my name in the credits!

If you notice some really bad voice acting among the shouting extras, that's me. Please think of it as the playful efforts of a lowly author.

But really though, wow, voice actors are true professionals at their craft. The lines of extras are all improvised, but everyone came up with things to say so easily... My mind went completely blank during my take, and nothing came to

me whatsoever. I was also really surprised at how different a VA's voice can be between their normal voice and the voice they put on for their role.

For things like episode previews, they're just given the text and told they have fifteen seconds, without anything to give them visual cues, and they get it in one take!

Yeah, it's all really impressive. Everything they do just oozes professional skill.

However... While all the attention usually goes to the VA cast, the production staff is just as impressive! The director makes comments and asks questions that make it crystal clear that they've actually read the source material, while the art content really makes me understand the depth of their craft. The sound director even made small critiques about the voice acting in spots where I, the author, found nothing wrong. The amazing thing is that the retake was even better!

As an amateur, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work and skill that goes into making an anime. It was a very precious experience, and I'm grateful for having had the opportunity to experience the making of an anime episode!

Now, I'd like to move on to my usual thanks.

To my editor U, thank you so much for putting up with me submitting my work at the eleventh hour!

I'm sorry for going off to watch the recording session for the anime even when I was getting close to the deadline. I knew in my heart that I probably should have been working on my manuscript, but I went because I felt there wouldn't be another opportunity like this. I offer my regrets here.

To the illustrator, Yukisan-sensei! The cover art this time is awesome! I even changed the climax of this volume a little after seeing the cover art!

Also, thanks to all the other people involved with this volume! I sincerely believe that it's thanks to all your support that I've finally been blessed with an anime adaptation! I look forward to working with you further in the future.

Last of all, I send my heartfelt gratitude to each and every one of you readers!

I repeat myself here, but it's thanks to your support that we're getting an anime adaptation. I hope you'll enjoy watching Yuuto and the others move around on the screen as much as I do.

Now, once again, I hope we'll see each other again in the next volume...

Seiichi Takayama

Bonus Short Stories

A World of Blue

“Hey, Al! Are you sure we’re going the right way?” Sigrún held her hair as the sea breeze whipped through her silver locks. She then turned back to face Albertina on the quarterdeck. For some reason, Albertina was standing on her hands, but after a soft exhale, she hopped up, performed a spin in mid-air, and landed deftly on her feet.

“Yup, we’re going the right way. I think we’re almost there,” Albertina answered with her usual nonchalance. In response, Sigrún skeptically furrowed her brow. Given that Albertina always had her head in the clouds, did she really understand the situation they found themselves in? Sigrún couldn’t keep that suspicion out of her mind.

“Are you *sure* we’re going the right way?” Sigrún asked again to drive home the point.

As she was, by all accounts, not one to beat around the bush, it wasn’t unusual for Sigrún to ask such questions. However, there was an undertone of worry in her voice that was rare given her usually unflappable demeanor. That was, perhaps, unavoidable given the circumstances.

Sigrún and the Múspell Unit were currently aboard the *Galleon*-class ship *Noah* and were heading toward the Flame Clan capital of Blíkjanda-Böl. Before they had set off on their voyage, the Steel Clan had already spotted a massive Flame Clan force advancing over the horizon, and it was no exaggeration to say that the fate of the Steel Clan rested in the hands of the Múspell Unit.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Sigrún saw the same scene no matter which direction she turned her head. The sea stretched across the horizon. The only thing one could see around the ship was water, water, and more water. This had been the case for the last ten days.

While Sigrún had been deeply moved at her first sight of the ocean, she was

now tired of staring out at the empty expanses of water. She pined for the sight of land. Could it be that they were headed in the wrong direction? Would they be doomed to wander this endless expanse of water for eternity? Those thoughts kept swirling around in Sigrún's mind as she stared at the unending sea.

"It's okay, Mother Rún. I can smell dirt and trees from that way." The one who confidently made that observation wasn't Albertina, but rather Sigrún's protégé, Hildegard.

"Your nose is as impressive as ever."

"Huh? You can't tell, Big Sister Rún?" Albertina's surprised exclamation came down from the quarterdeck. Sigrún could only muster a dry laugh in response. She possessed the rune Hati, Devourer of the Moon, and was fairly confident in her own sense of smell, but it appeared these two were on another level entirely.

"Such dependable little sisters," Sigrún said with a faint shrug of her shoulders. She kept the rest of her thoughts about their lack of dependability on land to herself.

Memory

"Tch!"

"Whoa!"

Yuuto barely managed to block the slash from Skáviðr's wooden sword. Yuuto's relief was short-lived, however, as Skáviðr unleashed a second diagonal blow from below.

"Ack!"

While Yuuto was somehow able to block the attack, he wasn't able to fully absorb the blow itself. He hurriedly stepped back to regain his footing and got himself back into a proper stance. His drill instructor had no qualms about letting his patriarch have it. It went without saying that Skáviðr was holding back to avoid injuring him, but even so, a moment's lapse in concentration was enough to leave a painful reminder in its wake. Yuuto couldn't afford to give

Skáviðr an opening.

Of course, this was the sort of training that Yuuto actually wanted. The practice wouldn't be particularly useful otherwise. Even though Yuuto was now þjóðann, Skáviðr showed no hesitation toward striking him when sparring. Skáviðr was a treasure worth his weight in gold.

"Oh... It was just a dream."

When he opened his eyes, Yuuto saw not the courtyard from earlier, but a familiar ceiling. Yuuto knew in his heart of hearts that Skáviðr was gone. He was gone and would never be coming back. Yuuto clutched at the ache in his chest as he sat up in bed. It was about time that he got back to work; to carry out the task he'd been entrusted with.

Mitsuki's First Time

"Huh, it went out."

"Y-Your Highness! Ephy will do it..." the young lady-in-waiting said nervously as Mitsuki sat there, tilting her head quizzically with sawdust in her hands.

The lady-in-waiting, Ephelia's, response was perfectly understandable. Mitsuki was the first wife of Suoh-Yuuto, the newly-crowned þjóðann. She was a woman to whom even patriarchs, rulers of countries in their own right, bowed their heads in respect. And yet Mitsuki was currently trying to start a fire, the sort of chore that was left for lowly servants. As Mitsuki's lady-in-waiting, it was no surprise that Ephelia would be in an anxious stir over Mitsuki's current behavior.

"No, no. Let me do it. I wanted to try it at least once! Mm! Mmph!"

As for Mitsuki herself, she began working the bow drill back and forth, trying to get a fire started, oblivious to Ephelia's panic. Starting a fire with a bow drill was quite labor-intensive.

"Y-Your Highness! Y-Your dress!"

"Don't worry about it. I've come this far, I wanna see this through!"

Ephelia looked on with worry, her voice shrill as she was on the verge of panic, but Mitsuki was treating the exercise as a form of hands-on learning. Mitsuki's curiosity had been piqued by the thought of trying something new, and she was now completely absorbed in the task at hand.

"I gotta put as much love as I can into Yuu-kun's dinner!"

Mitsuki's eyes glinted with motivation and her brow beaded with sweat as she worked the bow drill. She believed that her greatest duty as Yuuto's wife was to welcome him home with a warm meal and a bright smile. Her pride demanded that she do as much of the hard work in preparing her beloved husband's meal herself, with as little help from others, as possible. Or perhaps there was a part of her that was still dealing with the frustrations that came with being unable to do much on her own during her life back in Japan.

"Oh! There's the smoke. Just need to put it carefully into the sawdust and... Ffft."

Mitsuki covered the smoking piece of paper with sawdust, careful not to smother it as she gently blew upon the smoke. Eventually, a small flame erupted from the pile of sawdust.

"Got it! Look, Ephy! I got it!" Mitsuki said happily, holding her fists up in triumph. Although her face was smeared with soot, Mitsuki beamed at Ephelia. To Ephelia, that beaming smile outshone the sun itself.









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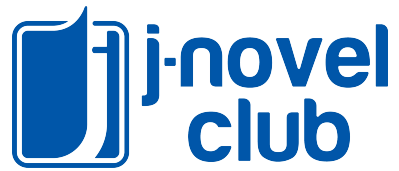
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The Master of Ragnarok & Blesser of Einherjar: Volume 16

by Seiichi Takayama

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